

Combatting Religious Extremism in Pakistan From the Youth Perspective

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ABSTRACT:

The rise of Islam, which emerged as a panacea for the world problems is seen as a problem itself by the west today. The reason for this blame is the rise of extremism and Islam phobia in the western societies. This has serious implications for personal, communal, national and international security. The involvement of youth in extremist exertions is very high. They are being more action-oriented, easy to be influenced by radical ideologies and as an agent for thrusting social change. Keeping in consideration the role of youth in adopting to or combatting extremism, it is imperative to find the perception of this important population about the problem under investigation. The research study was conducted in six universities in the federal capital Islamabad to reach to the youth's population. The research was guided by research questions that aimed at exploring students' perception about extremism and its various dimensions. The researcher collected data through an open-ended questionnaire from 1840 students to seek an in-depth understanding of the problem. In order to increase credibility in the findings, the researcher conducted focused group interview with 12 young faculty members. The data from the questionnaires were converted into percentages based on common themes. The interview data set were thematically analyzed to understand the causes of extremism and its suggested solutions. Recommendations were suggested to tackle the menace of extremism in Pakistan.

Keywords: Islam phobia, madrasahs, radicalism, religious extremism, solution.

Introduction:

Extremism is not a simple and easy term to define as reported by BBC in its news report¹. Even, the Joint Committee on Human Rights in United Kingdom cautioned the British ministers to use the word with care as there was no acceptable legal definition of 'extremism'. It is a relative term and depends on the society and state's interpretation for safeguarding its national interests². In simpler words, extremism can be understood as the use of radicalism for finding solutions and the harshness of the measures³. As regarding radicalism, Merriam-Webster dictionary defined it as opinions and behavior of people who favor extreme changes especially in government. Thus, it represents a group

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struggling for bringing a fundamental change in the prevalent political order⁴. Radicalism is a growing menace in most of the countries in South Asia⁵. It gained prominence during the seventies when military movements maneuvered for power in Middle East and Africa. Extremism became more dominant when Israeli's aggression increased against the Palestinians and after the Islamic revolution in Iran. Political struggle for power in Egypt, Libya and other neighboring countries strengthened radical forces in Islamic world and portrayed Muslims as extremists. The intervention of former Soviet Union in Afghanistan and the struggle of Afghan mujahidin against the soviet troops created a very volatile situation in South Asia. The collapse of Soviet Union and the demise of cold war left the jihadi groups in possession of large stock of weapons. The aggression of Indian troops in occupied Kashmir and the US policy of supporting Israel's high handedness provided the jihadi groups another reason to continue their armed struggle in the pretext of helping oppressed Muslims. The situation was aggravated to the climax by the incident of 9/11⁶. The concept of Islam phobia popularized by the western media and analysts with the aim to defame Islam and blame Muslims for aggression and non-tolerance⁷. Islam phobia was used to represent fear of Islam and Muslims as a threat to democratic ideals and world peace⁸. In fact, in some western societies, Islam phobia was highly supported as hatred towards Islam and to victimize Muslim communities⁹. The Western propaganda against Islam as a religion encouraging aggression and war is usually referred to the following verses of Holy Quran:

¹⁰ فَإِذَا لَقَيْتُمُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا فَصَرِّبُوا الرِّقَابَ حَتَّىٰ إِذَا أَثْبَتْتُمُوهُمْ

“Now when you meet those who are bent on denying the truth, smite their necks until you overcome them fully...”

¹¹ سَأُلْقِي فِي قُلُوبِ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا الرُّعْبَ فَاصْرِبُوا فَوْقَ الْأَعْنَاقِ وَاصْرِبُوا مِنْهُمْ كُلَّ بَنَاتٍ

“I shall cast terror into the hearts of those who are bent on denying the truth; strike, then, their necks, [O believers,] and strike off every one of their fingertips.”

These verses are quoted without the reference to the context in which they are used just to defame Islam. It must be noted that these verses referred to the state of war when the disbelievers are bent upon fighting with the Muslims and is not applicable during normal situation of peace. Thus, Islam is a religion of peace and does not encourage aggression.

Extremism also served a strategic purpose in conflict and/or political competition during the last few decades. In this case, the extremist can be viewed as a vested interest group that promotes its interest by choosing the degree of

extremism¹². The growth of military wings in political parties also act as extremist instrument in sorting political conflict. In case of conflict or competition between two rival countries, the degree of extremism has an important role. If one of the countries has strong economy, power and democracy, then it will have a lower level of extremism as compared to country with weak government and unstable democratic institutions. As a result, weak countries have higher degree of extremism¹³.

The rise of diverse radical groups in the Muslim countries, the gaining of power by the military dictators, the rise of Islamist parties and the existence of monarchical governments may be some instances for precipitating extremism. Furthermore, the rise of Taliban and their violation of human rights especially those relating to women raised serious concern across the western democratic countries. The situation is further aggravated by the growth of various Islamic military groups with conflicting interests like lashkars, sipah, jaish, Al Qaida etc. These groups resorted to aggressive and forceful methods to further their interests and thus defame Muslims; and Islam is portrayed as a religion supporting the use of force in the name of jihad. These extremist groups are labelled as a threat to the world peace¹⁴. Moreover, the extremists' exertions have considerably increased in South Asia, particularly in Pakistan and Afghanistan¹⁵. There is a dire need to combat these extremists and to portray the true picture of Islam before the western world. The academic institutions, scholars, electronic media, religious leaders and political parties have an important role in this direction. They must struggle for depicting Islam not as a problem but as solution to the existing problems of the world¹⁶. Research studies reported a growing involvement of youths in violent and extremist activities in the western societies¹⁷. In this direction, it is imperative to find the perception of youths related to extremism, its causes and possible solutions. This is very important as the youths are considered more action oriented, high risk takers and vocal activists towards brining social change¹⁸. It will be useful to find the perception of this age group in order to understand the problem of extremism from a different but useful perspective. We selected 1840 students from six universities in Islamabad for representing the youth and 12 faculty members with age below 40.

SIGNIFICANCE OF RESEARCH

This research highlights the views and perceptions of the youth who are so prone for action and bringing social change. The findings of the research will help in understanding the youth's perspective in combatting radicalism and religious extremism in Pakistan. The research findings may also help the politi-

cal thinkers, religious scholars and policy framers in understanding the root causes of extremism in our country which will help in devising strategies for eradicating this menace from our country and bringing stability and peace in the country.

Research questions: The following four questions guided this research study.

Research Question 1. How the university youth perceive the concept of Extremism?

Research Question 2. How do the youth view themselves on extremism?

Research Question 3. What are the causes of religious extremism in Pakistan according to youth?

Research Question 4. How the menace of religious extremism in Pakistan can be tackled?

Methodology:

The study used qualitative method for collection and interpretation of data. For this purpose, an open-ended questionnaire and a Focused Group Interview (FGI) were used for the collection of data. The questionnaire sought data about how university students perceive the concept of extremism and its various dimensions. The questionnaire was distributed to 1840 university students selected from six universities in Islamabad through convenient random sampling technique. Permission was sought from the department heads for collection of data from the students. The number of questionnaires received from the participants were 1455. Some of the questionnaires were omitted due to incomplete data leaving 1322 questionnaires for final analysis of data. In order to increase credibility in the findings, a focused group interview was held with 12 faculty members; two faculty members selected from each university. The open-ended questionnaire was analyzed by grouping similar responses and then counting its frequency to find the percentages for a specific response. The responses from focused group interview were coded to identify similar themes.

Results and Discussion

Research Question 1. How the UG students perceive the concept of Extremism?

The responses of participants from the open-ended questionnaire revealed that extremism is the tendency to hold views which are far from being moderate /balanced. When matters and issues are in moderation, then it works well. The problem arises when the balance is disturbed, and the views and actions are taken towards either extreme. Some participants opined that there is a limit to which the matters can be taken. If this limit is crossed, then one enters in to extreme region. This was a well perceived concept about extremism which was

also supported by Pratt that extremism is to shift towards boundaries or edges from the appropriate center¹⁹.

While interpreting students' responses, it was found that students perceive the movements towards negative tendency as extremism. However, the movement in the opposite direction was not regarded as extremism. This can be understood from figure 1.

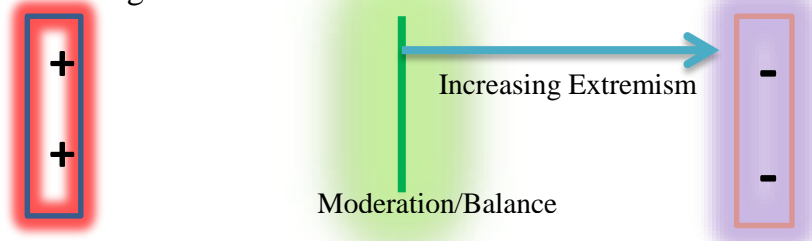


Figure 1. Extremism as moving towards negative from the line of moderation

The greater the distance from the line of moderation/balance, the greater the degree of extremism and vice versa. This is known as ‘tatarruf’ in Islam which represents extreme region²⁰.

The responses from the focused group interview are discussed below to understand the faculty members' perception from a deeper perspective. Pseudonyms are used instead of actual names.

[Naeem]: It is a phenomenon in which some people will go to any extent in proofing or supporting their views/cause.

[Ali]: And if this support threatens some people or groups of people.

[Fatima]: Extremism is the absence of flexibility in views and sticking to one's view point.

[Fizza]: It is about regarding one's views/beliefs more important and superior to others in social and religious matters.

[Ali]: It is like fighting without justifications. In fact, terrorism is extremism.

The discussion clarifies that supporting one's views without justification is extremism. Further, it threatens people or a group of people because of use of violence which is an important dimension also supported by Davydov²¹. However, if there is no threat to others, then it may not be included in the domain of extremism according to the participants. The extremist people are rigid in their beliefs and regard their beliefs more important which make them thrust their beliefs on others thus creating a conflicting situation. This makes extremism very close to terrorism if backed by force²². However, Islam is against Compulsion and enforcing one's beliefs on others. The Holy Quran says:

وَلَوْ شَاءَ رَبُّكَ لَآمَنَ مَنْ فِي الْأَرْضِ كُلُّهُمْ جَمِيعًا أَفَأَنْتَ تُكْرِهُ النَّاسَ حَتَّىٰ يَكُونُوا مُؤْمِنِينَ²³

“If it had been thy Lord's will, they would all have believed, all who are on

earth! Wilt thou then compel mankind, against their will, to believe!”

At another place, the Holy Quran says:

فَإِنْ حَاجُّوكَ فَقُلْ أَسْلَمْتُ وَجْهِيَ لِلَّهِ وَمَنِ اتَّبَعَنِ وَقُلْ لِلَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْكِتَابَ وَالْأُمِّيِّينَ أَسْلَمْتُمْ قَارِءٌ

أَسْلَمُوا فَقَدِ اهْتَدَوْا وَإِنْ تَوَلَّوْا فَإِنَّمَا عَلَيْكَ الْبَلَاءُ وَاللَّهُ بَصِيرٌ بِالْعِبَادِ²⁴

“So if they dispute with thee, say: "I have submitted my whole self to Allah and so have those who follow me." And say to the People of the Book and to those who are unlearned: "Do ye (also) submit yourselves?" If they do, they are in right guidance, but if they turn back, Thy duty is to convey the Message; and in Allah's sight are (all) His servants”.

These two verses emphasize that there is no room in Islam for exerting one's belief and ideology on others as it is Allah's will to give guidance to those who are led astray.

Research Question 2. How do UG students view 'themselves' on extremism?

The data from the open-ended questionnaire indicated that the participants were very clear that they don't have any extremist tendency. The students expressed that they follow a path of moderation and balance as enunciated by Islam. The students believe that extreme views cannot be appreciated, and the right course is the one which is balanced. Some participants mentioned that they develop extreme anger and hatred in some situations/events. This usually happens when they see killing of innocent people by terrorists, target killing and attacking schools by terrorists etc.

However, according to Adorno, this is one of the causes of extremism as the extremist groups think that the aggressor deserves punishment and thus they have a right to use violence against such persons²⁵. The participants opined that they wish such aggressors should be arrested and punished for their brutalities by the state and not by the individuals or any groups. The problem arises when the groups take action against the offenders and violate state laws.

The following responses were made by participants in FGI.

[Sara]: An educated person cannot be extremist.

[Ali]: I am not extremist. I am innocent.

[Ayesha]: I am a neutral person like Switzerland.

[Fizza]: I have extremist tendency regarding my education and my studies.

It seems that the participants cannot imagine an educated person to hold extremist views. Though, a person may have a greater preference towards a particular phenomenon/event/choice but if such preference pose no threat to others, then such preferences cannot be regarded as being extreme.

One of the participants said, 'I am extremely staunch in my religious beliefs

and I cannot tolerate anything against my religion and prophets'. This is a statement that is true for the followers of any religion. This is also supported by Pratt arguing that all religions urge peace and respect for human life²⁶. Similar findings are also reported in other studies about religions and human cultures²⁷. Thus, religious fundamentalism is not necessarily extremism as portrayed by some groups in the western societies^{28, 29}.

Research Question 3. What are the causes of religious extremism in Pakistan according to UG students?

Findings from the Students' Questionnaire

The university students identified various factors responsible for religious extremism in Pakistan. The percentage for various factors identified from analysis of open ended questionnaire is shown in figure 2. The most contributing factor for extremism in Pakistan was identified as the growth of madrassahs (46%) followed by the influence of social media and Islamic channels (42%). The students also identified the role of sectarianism and radical thinking as another cause of extremism (37%). The emotional temperament of Pakistani society is also responsible for extremism (34%) as people are very emotional and can be easily led by extremist propaganda. 29% students viewed that weak government is another cause of religious extremism as the government cannot take action against radical groups as happening in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. Another cause of extremism was illiteracy which was viewed by 23% participants. 21% students expressed that emotional speeches by religious leaders also instigates extremism as they ignite people's emotion and persuade them to extremist actions against rival groups. In addition, 19% students opined that narrow mindedness of people also contributes towards extremist tendency. Lastly, 16% students regard xenophobic beliefs accountable for extremism in Pakistan which refers to feeling of hatred towards foreigners.

Findings from the FGI

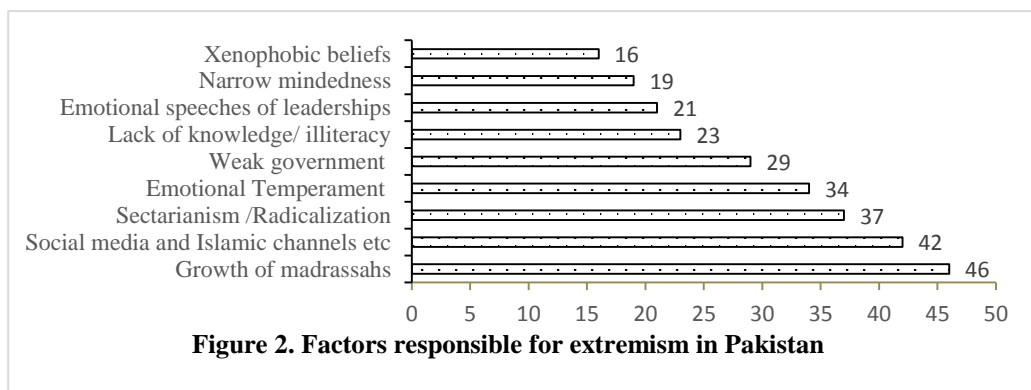


Figure 2. Factors responsible for extremism in Pakistan

The findings from the open-ended questionnaire coupled with statements from FGI on the similar themes are discussed together for an in-depth understanding. The participants in the FGI commented on the growth of madrassahs and their separate course of studies as a major cause of extremism which was also found from the analysis of open ended questionnaire. The participants expressed their concern that the religious institutions are not effectively monitored and regulated, thus producing students with a specific mindset. This is alarming as the curriculum of these madrassahs offer no or less employment skills³⁰. Besides there is a difficulty in finding teachers for these institutions who possess knowledge of modern science and religious curriculum³¹. One of the participants pointed to a very interesting dimension that the students in madrassahs receive frequent punishment from their teachers thus instilling aggressive behaviour in them. Perhaps, this accounts for learning violence in madrassahs. Bassem propounded similar argument that students in madrassahs learn violence as the easiest and effective method to solve problems which finally results in the use of same outside madrassahs³².

As regarding the role of social media and television channels, the participants in FGI expressed that social media is a powerful tool that influences the mind of youths and transform their behavior for garnering a particular support. The number of television channels have considerably increased at present. These channels provide coverage to the extremist's activities through breaking news thereby sensationalizing information for increasing their rating.

Fawad, one of the participants said, the extremists want to create terror and the media is helping them propagate this terror in people heart through its extensive public out-reach and media coverage.

This is sadly true keeping in view the influence of social media and TV channels, that depict western societies as nurse for injustices and evil³³. Many of the youths are attracted by the propagation of such posts, news, blogs and sermons convincing them to prepare for retaliatory actions in the name of religion³⁴ and the desire to seek heaven in the hereafter³⁵.

The students expressed that the people in Pakistan have an emotional temperament and lack patience and tolerance towards other communities. In this kind of circumstances, some groups of people try to impose their beliefs on others and/or try to suppress antagonistic groups. This leads to xenophobic beliefs which results in extremism^{36,37}. However, Islam denounces such beliefs and practices. The Holy Quran says:

38 لَا إِكْرَاهَ فِي الدِّينِ

“Let there be no compulsion in religion”.

At another places, the Holy Quran ordains:

قُلْ يَا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ لَا تَغْلُوا فِي دِينِكُمْ غَيْرَ الْحَقِّ³⁹

“Say: "O people of the Book! exceed not in your religion the bounds (of what is proper), trespassing beyond the truth.”

Thus, Islam preaches tolerance and control to its followers and is against exertions and force.

The participants in the FGI identified that the cheap and easy access to address people by religious leaders/preachers is one of the major causes of inflaming extremism in the society.

[Moiz]: The mullas (religious preacher in mosques) shall be prohibited from giving public sermons on loudspeakers except the religious sermons. They misguide our people.

[Ali]: We are very emotional in religious matters and lack tolerance. This is then exploited by the religious and political leaders.

The role of religious and political leaders in encouraging extremism was very evident in the participants’ responses. According to Barry, the followers follow the instructions of their religious leaders without even verifying the authenticity of the blame and thus indulge in violent activities⁴⁰. However, adopting western ideals by some groups pave the way for extremist elements to creep against them⁴¹.

Another cause mentioned by the participants was the lack of knowledge about Islam. This cause has other implication as well such as misinterpretation of religious teaching. The religious scholars, teachers and leaders resort to emotional speeches which results in extremism. Davies supported the same contention that the religious scripts are misinterpreted by priests and religious clerics to justify killings of rival groups⁴².

Some participants in the FGI opined that poverty and unemployment is also responsible for extremism. This is also supported by Davydov that dissatisfaction from social and economic system contributes towards extremism⁴³. The communist revolutions in the twentieth century were instigated by these social and economic disparities.

Research Question 4. How the menace of extremism in Pakistan can be tackled?

Findings from the Students’ Questionnaire:

The responses from the open-ended questionnaire is shown in figure 3. The solution that is advocated by a large number of participants is adopting moderation in one’s life (54%). The students also expressed that regulating and a check on social and electronic media will also help in tackling extremist

tendency (47%). Improving literacy was viewed by 38% of students while 36% students opined that a close check on madrassah's education will help in minimizing extremism. 33% students expressed that understanding of religion will also decrease extremism as Islam is a religion of peace and not aggression. 28% students viewed that there is a need to monitor khutbahs given in mosques and speeches of religious leaders. 26% students expressed that we should develop spirit of tolerance and patience towards other communities and sects. The same number of students viewed that there should be continuous dialogue between extremist groups to resolve mutual differences and preach tolerance towards others. 23% students opined to preach respect for human life and not to harm others as given by Islam. 18% students expressed that we should not interfere in the affairs of others and mind our own business while, 15% students suggested that the Muslims should show open-mindedness and avoid parochial feelings towards other communities.

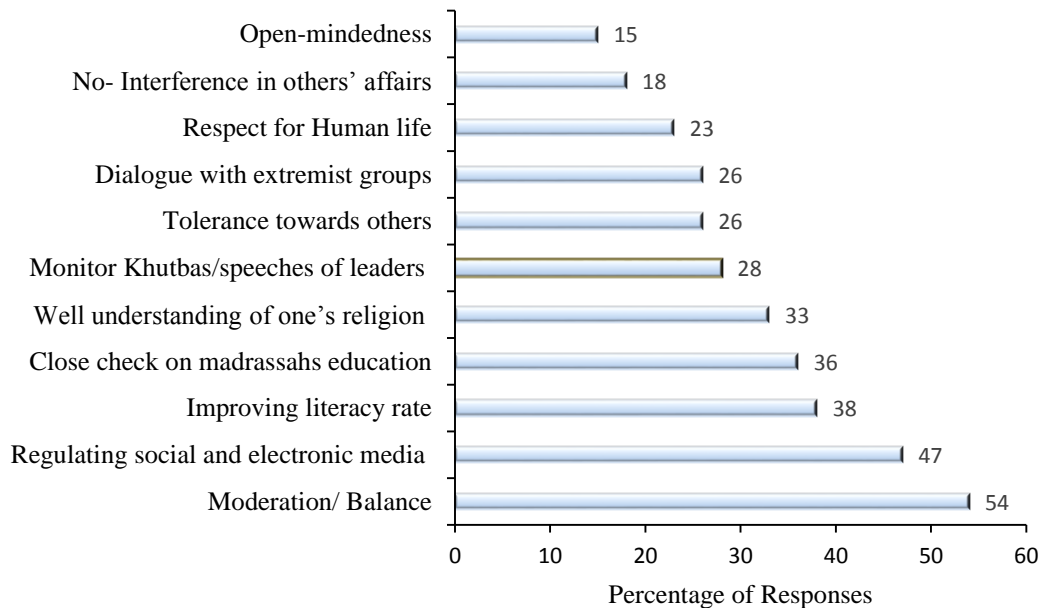


Figure 3. Tackling religious extremism in Pakistan.

Findings from the FGI

For a deeper understanding on tackling extremism in Pakistan, the responses of students in FGI were sought. The participants in FGI discussed moderation for minimizing the influence of extremism. Fatima, a student coming from a higher socio-economic background said, "Moderation is the best protector against extremism".

The participants repudiated extremist thinking as outdated and a threat to nati-

on's security. They viewed that the best course of action is that of moderation and equilibrium. This is what is enunciated by Islam and majority of the participants referred to it in their responses that 'the best path is that of moderation'. This is mentioned in the Holy Quran in the following words.

يَا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ لَا تَغْلُوا فِي دِينِكُمْ وَلَا تَقُولُوا عَلَى اللَّهِ إِلَّا الْحَقَّ⁴⁴

“O People of the Book! Commit no excesses in your religion: Nor say of Allah aught but the truth”.

At another place, Allah says in the Holy Quran:

وَكَذَلِكَ جَعَلْنَاكُمْ أُمَّةً وَسَطًا⁴⁵

“Thus, have we made of you an Ummat justly balanced”.

Thus, the balanced and moderate practices shall be adopted in life to avoid conflict and aggression.

The participants of FGI viewed that extremist activities can be controlled through understanding our religion and monitoring the madrassahs system in Pakistan. Hamza, a student coming from a staunch religious family said, “if we understand our religion, extremism would vanish itself”. Moore also advocated that understanding religious' injunctions will promote respect for others' beliefs and ideals⁴⁶.

Hazrat Aisha (RA) narrated that the Holy Prophet said,

“Do good deeds properly, sincerely and moderately”⁴⁷

However, there shall be a proper system to monitor and regulate the teaching and learning of religious curriculum. This is an important safeguard against extremism keeping in mind that the so called 'Taliban' were also the product of these religious schools which grew very rapidly during 80's and 90's. However, the effort to reform and regulate madrassahs' education in Pakistan is still weak⁴⁸. Perhaps, incorporating employability skills in madrassah's education may help the students in availing economic opportunities, alleviating poverty and extremism⁴⁹. Some participants suggested to monitor khutbahs and speeches of religious and political leaders. The leaderships shall be requested to make responsible statements and shall not criticize or blame the other groups.

The participants also suggested combatting extremism through improving literacy rate by making education free and compulsory. Critical and informed idealism is more important than moderation which can be achieved through improvement in education⁵⁰. Besides, it will also help in improving the level of tolerance, respecting other' beliefs and convincing others through forceful arguments rather than resorting to violence⁵¹. We should follow the Holy Quran injunction that reads:

وَعِبَادُ الرَّحْمَنِ الَّذِينَ يَمْشُونَ عَلَى الْأَرْضِ هَوْنًا وَإِذَا خَاطَبَهُمُ الْجَاهِلُونَ قَالُوا سَلَامًا⁵²

“And the servants of ((Allah)) Most Gracious are those who walk on the earth in humility, and when the ignorant address them, they say, ‘Peace!’”

Such are the noble persons who follow their life with humility and do not fight with foolish and ignorant people, rather they pray for them and refrain from extremist activities.

Conclusion:

Religious extremism has raised serious concern at present with local, national and international implications for individual and collective security⁵³. The role of university students in combatting extremism cannot be underestimated due to youths being action-oriented and change seekers. The university youths viewed extremism as a tendency to move from moderation towards negative direction. The participants expressed that they do not have extremist tendency. The participants identified various causes of extremism and suggested ways to tackle extremism. However, in the presence of continuing political turmoil in Afghanistan and the growing atrocities of Indian military forces in occupied Kashmir, a quick solution to extremism in South Asia is bleak⁵⁴. A panacea for extremism in South Asia requires solution to these regional conflicts besides imparting critical education for promoting respect towards other communities⁵⁵

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