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Religious Education of the Younger Generation

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At present the problem of imparting religious education to our children is exercising the minds of many parents and guardians. Those who are con- concerned about the weal, welfare and spiritual well-being of our budding youths feel concerned that, in the absence of proper understanding of the fundamental beliefs and cardinal principles of religion, our children may become preys to the scepticism and disbelief which is destroying the moral fabric of our society—society which is euphemistically called "permissive society".

This concern is felt in all parts of the world where people hold fast to their religious beliefs and cherish them as the storehouse of best moral values. In particular, in countries of the West, where our people are settled with their families, this concern is more vocally, and at times vociferously, expressed; and rightly so, because our children are amenable to extraneous influences which keep on assailing and undermining their religious beliefs, dogmas and susceptibilities.

Whilst I fully endorse the proposition that there is a crying need for imparting knowledge of the fundamentals of our religion and its cardinal principles to the new generation, I join issue with the proponents of these ideas on the methods to be adopted for achieving this end.

My purpose in writing this article is to sound a note of warning that religious education of the conventional type which makes children of 6 to 10 memorise the "*Usool-e-Deen*" and "*Furoo-e-Deen*" with the dogmatic comments on them handed down to us from generation to generation, will not in the least serve the purpose we have in view, namely, to prepare our future generations for the onslaught from various quarters on their religious beliefs and practices.

When I say this, I am speaking from personal knowledge having attended such a "*Maktab*" (school) in my childhood where venerable preachers religiously repeated and reiterated all that they were expected to impart to their young pupils and, in fulfilment of what they thought to be part of their duty, made the pupils memorise them, and even chant them with all the zeal and fervour the young souls were capable

of.

It is said that: "*Truth is bitter but its fruit is sweet*". I know that what I am trying to expound may be unpalatable or may seem to be gall and wormwood to the taste of many who are steeped in orthodoxy; but in the larger interest of truth it must be said for whatever it is worth . Present day knowledge of chi Id psychology has led many advanced countries to modify and revise their concepts of children's education at the earliest stage.

It is now well-recognised that highly learned, capable and understanding teachers are required to handle children just when they embark on their studies because, during their formative years, they must be given every encouragement and opportunity to develop their enquiring minds.

When we talk about the religious education of our children, do we have in mind selection and appointment of persons possessing aptitude and education of the highest standard both religious and secular, and capability to mould the character and develop the reasoning faculties of our children in the best of traditions?

Are we not thinking of taking unction to our souls by entrusting them to the care of half-baked teachers of theology who accept the appointments more for earning their livelihood than with the high motives of inculcating love of religion amongst the pupils by explaining and expounding the undercurrent of truth and love of God and His creatures which pervades His universe and which is the essence of our religion?

When we ask the parents to send their children to religious schools, do we tell them to whose care they will be entrusted, or are we presuming that it does not matter a whit who is to be entrusted this sacred duty so long as he is having a smattering of the fundamental principles of our religion?

I am sincerely of the view that imparting of religious knowledge in a perfunctory manner will not serve the purpose and those who receive it will remain as vulnerable as those who never attend such schools or classes. It would be like laying the foundation of a house on quicksand—building an edifice with a tottering base.

It may appear to quite a few that I am over-emphasising one particular aspect of the matter and magnifying it manifold, but I honestly believe that, so far, very little has been done to produce the right type of religious teachers who can handle the education of our younger generation and equip them with sound knowledge and beliefs that can withstand attacks of outsiders, and emerge successfully in later life with unflinching faith and unshakeable belief in the righteousness of our creed.

Some years back I got an English translation of "*Bab-ul-Ahada Ashara*" which is an exposition of the Eleventh Chapter of Allama Hilli's work on the fundamental principles of Shi'a beliefs by Miqdad-e-Fazil al-Hilli, one of the foremost disciples of Allama Hilli. According to the translator, this book is being taught in a large number of Shi'a religious schools because it explains and clarifies the fundamental principles

of Islam as understood and applied by Shi'a theologians.

The translator mentions that the Eleventh Chapter of the treatise of Allama Hilli is so difficult to understand that even scholars of religion cannot properly comprehend it and, for that reason, the commentator has expounded and elaborated the matters set out in it so as to make them easily understandable.

With all due deference to the learned commentator, the book is full of puerile arguments developed in a laboured manner, reminiscent of the style of Greek logicians of yore. These syllogistic exercises appear to be far below the standard to be expected in a work associated with the name of one of the most respected and learned Shi'a divines, Allama Hilli.

Only very recently the late Agha Mirza Mehdi Pooya published his "*Fundamentals of Islam*" in English for the younger generation to meet a long-felt want. In my view, every person who wants his children to understand the fundamental principles of Islam, as enunciated by the Shi'a School, must make this book available to them.

I may hasten to add that the work is not meant for children of very tender age but for those who have reached sufficient maturity and are capable of discernment. To me it seems that religious knowledge, in the right sense of the word, as distinct and distinguished from religious jingoism, can be imparted only to children who have reached such age.

Agha Pooya's "*Fundamentals of Islam*" may, perhaps serve a far better purpose than the classes conducted by religious teachers whose scholastic credentials are suspect and whose own knowledge is strictly limited, and who, more often than not, are so hide-bound in their approach that they generate more heat than light in the course of the discussions and discourses.

Lest I am misunderstood, I may clarify that I am all for selection and appointment of really learned and competent teachers of religious principles and doctrines, in the true sense of the term, who can inculcate and develop a taste and kindle a yearning for religion in their pupils and not merely teach as a fulfilment of their professional duty during the appointed hours; persons who can clear mental cobwebs and aberrations by encouraging questions and arguments and not stifle them by snubs and scorn, persons who, like Tennyson, feel:

There is more truth in honest doubts
Believe me, than in all your creeds.

My genuine apprehension is that such dedicated persons are so rare and difficult to find that, instead of searching for them far and wide, we may compromise by settling for and selecting persons who, to us, may seem to be second or third best but who, in reality, may be the very antithesis of what is needed by the yearning hearts and inquiring minds of our talented youths whose appetite for information and knowledge is whetted by the present day discoveries of science and progress in methods of education.

The topic of religious education cannot be discussed without mentioning the role of Majalis al-Imam Husain which have acquired the status of a religious institution in our society. The platforms which they provide during the months of Muharram and Safar can be very effectively used for the purpose in view, but unfortunately it must be admitted in all honesty that they have not even touched the fringe of the problem.

They have fallen far short of expectation, mainly due to the fact that many of the venerable gentlemen who adorn the pulpits and deliver lectures are so steeped in outworn concepts, wrongly called traditions, that, if I may be excused the use of the expression in connection with the performance of these august persons, they simply get "inebriated by the exuberance of their own verbosity".

More often than not, their sermons are "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing". Times out of number they put forward arguments which cannot bear scrutiny, knowing full well that what they say will go unchallenged because time-worn, unwritten rules of behaviour in such Majalis require the audience to mutely suffer such travesties of facts.

They expound the view of some of the Ulema of bygone days who, with due deference to the very valuable work done by them and contributions made in the course of development of religious thoughts, have made many patent mistakes and errors of judgment.

This is because they were of earth, earthly. This is because they were fallible human beings like us. I am not saying these things to denigrate these learned masters of the past who have earned our respect and esteem by their voluminous positive contributions. The fault lies squarely with their successors who have not used their reasoning faculties, the most precious gift of God to mankind, and evading and avoiding all research, have adopted a subservient and even atavistic attitude in using the material handed down to them by the past generation of religious scholars.

If many of the learned Ulema of the past made mistakes, they can well be attributed to the circum-stances in which they were working, to the fact that they did not have at their disposal all the facilities for research that we have today. In those days, general knowledge in various fields was strictly limited, means of communication were scant and meager.

If our present day religious scholars fail to do research in various aspects and facets of religion and take shelter behind the works of past scholars, placing them on pedestals which facts and circumstances do not warrant, who is to be blamed for it? It is such un- questioning attitude that is likely to alienate our younger generation from religion and all that it stands for. We find that in sermons delivered from the pulpits often there are glaring contradictions which create not only credibility gaps but also lead to the impression, albeit wrong, that what are narrated as facts of history are fibs, mere myths and figments of imagination.

If sweeping statements are made in the course of these sermons which, on the face of them, are patently illogical and untrue, and they go un- challenged, many of our intelligent and discerning youths

may begin to doubt and question the veracity of other facts and principles which are placed in juxtaposition with them. Such sermons prove counter-productive.

It is true that to the vast majority of people who attend the Majalis al-Aza whatever is preached from the pulpit is the essence of truth and they just keep on gaping with admiration, unmindful of the correctness or otherwise of the utterances in the tradition of the admiration of the young pupils of Goldsmith for their teacher about which he has said:

And still they gazed and still their wonder grew
How one small head could carry all he knew.

But it is not what these majority of simple souls think or believe that really matters. It is what the thinking, brooding, reflecting intelligentsia amongst our younger generation think and believe that counts. It is these intellectual elites who can really mould and influence the future generations of our people and so it is our religious duty to cater for their spiritual needs and to ensure that they get ample opportunity to challenge all assertions and averments made in the course of the perorations.

This can be possible if we divide the time of our majalis into two parts—one for delivery of the lectures as at present and the other, immediately following it, for discussions on various aspects of religion, including questioning of facts and principles enunciated during the harangue but not necessarily confined to it. Such symposia can be held with two or three participants, including the speaker of that day, with some learned man presiding as compare to regulate the proceedings and ensure that the discussion is held at an intellectual level and there are no frivolities.

Such programmes must, at the same time, provide utmost freedom to the participants to air their views without any recrimination and rancour, subject, however, to maintenance of standards of decency and decorum associated with such solemn functions. Out of such functions and discussions, more often than not, considerable benefits are likely to accrue to the audience as well as the participants.

It is possible that some of the other participants may be more knowledgeable than the main speaker of the day and the latter may himself gain the most from such discussions. At least, when he knows that he will not be able to get away with his “terminological inexactitudes” he will think twice before taking liberty with facts and common sense. Has not Firdousi the immortal poet of Iran, said:

I have heard from the wise man that there is a lot of wisdom (in this world) But it is scattered amongst a very large number of people.)

Unless we convert our Majalis al-Aza into forums of such religious discussions, of course, retaining the essential characteristic of it by allocating a reason- able time for Azadaree al-Husain, one of the most important purposes of it will be lost and frustrated.

I have made bold to say several things which may be unpalatable to many because I feel that truth

transcends all other considerations. I am reminded of the verse of Sadi:

Sadi do not tread the path of formality
If you know the truth, speak it up and be done with it
Speak out what you know as the truth for it is better that way
Neither indulge in graft nor in blandishments.

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