

Essay : The role of religious leaders in promoting peace and combating extremism

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Outline

1. Introduction

The religious leaders have a pivotal role in building peace and countering terrorism. Recently, extremism is increasing because of a number of reasons like the biased literature and the use of religion for political interests. It has adverse impacts in the form of increasing Islamophobia. However, the religious leaders can establish peace by promoting the principle of moderation, and by disowning the extremist ideologies.

2. Leading causes of extremism in the world

- (a) Use of religion for political gains
- (b) Misuse of the Jihad ideology

(c) Biased literature

3. Implications of extremism

(a) Presenting an existential threat to the image of Islam

(b) Renaissance of Islamophobia

(c) Increasing blasphemy related incidents

4. The role of religious leaders in promoting peace and combating extremism

(a) Initiate the inter-faith dialogues

(b) Project Islam as a peaceful religion

(c) Spread the basic tenets of moderation

(d) Disown extremist groups and their ideologies

(e) Spread global awareness about peaceful living

(f) Ensure the status and rights of women

(g) Teach about the Prophet (PBUH) as a peacemaker

5. Conclusion

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The dark chapter of extremism surfaced again in the recent years, when a deadly terrorist attack took place in Christchurch, New Zealand, where 51 innocent people were martyred, and a number of people got injured by an extremist who rushed into two mosques and opened fire.

This tragedy emphasizes the urgency of great efforts which are needed to nip extremism in the bud.

This can be done by taking all the stakeholders on the board, and religious leaders are one of them. The main causes of extremism are the use of religion for the political gains, preaching of Jihad ideology in a wrong way and biased literature. Outcomes are emerging in the form of an existential threat to the image of Islam, renaissance of Islamophobia in Europe, and a rise in blasphemous

incidents. However, the menace of extremism, can be eliminated through the active role of religious leaders who can do this sacred duty by initiating the inter-faith dialogue, projecting Islam as a peaceful religion, spreading the basic tenets of moderation, disowning the extremist groups and their false ideologies, spreading global awareness about how to live peacefully, ensuring the status of women and unveiling the personality of Prophet (PBUH) as a peacemaker. Sum and substance of the whole discussion is that the religious leaders can do wonders in building peace and countering extremism. Extremism is spreading its tentacles due to numerous reasons. It has nefarious impacts. However, the religious leaders can build peace by preaching the principle of moderation, and by

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disowning extremist ideologies.

The first and foremost cause of extremism is the use of religion for political gains. Every religion has certain commandments. But these commandments are misused by the political elites for their vested interests. They play with the sentiments of people. This thing promotes extremist tendencies among different sects.

For example, Narendra Modi is doing in India. He used extremist tactics to gain the political support of Hindu va led people by marginalizing the Muslim minority. The practical manifestation of extremism is Gujarat riots which happened in 2002 in which more than 790 Muslims and 254 Hindus died according the official figures of the Indian government.

Another cause of extremism is the misuse of the Jihad ideology. Even some terrorist groups are falsely using the ideology of Jihad to corrupt the young minds. They do not even know the true spirit of Jihad. In Islam, the purpose of Jihad is to eradicate "Fihra" and to build peace. Due to the misuse of Jihad's ideology, extremism is increasing. For example, TTP - a terrorist group - under the shadow of self-proclaimed Jihad - is spreading extremism as well as terrorism in different parts of Pakistan. The militancy is resurging in Pakistan. On 30th of January, 2023, the Peshwar mosque was targeted by the TTP. In this terrific attack, 84 people were killed and many more injured.

Biased literature is also spreading extremism. The spiritual food of human brain comes through knowledge. Articles, magazines and books are major sources which play a significant role in the enlightenment of human thinking. But these can toxify human brains, when contaminated with extremist content. They can turn a moderate person into an extremist person. For instance, the book 'Clash of Civilization' which is written by Huntington. This book portrayed Islam as anti-west. And Muslim civilization is a threat to the western civilization. Consequently, many of the Europeans became extreme against the Muslim and Islam. In this way, extremism was fuelled by the biased literature.

The implications of extremism are surfacing in different

ways, one of them is an existential threat to the soft image of Islam. The face of political Islam is neither a mullah nor a religious leader. It is extremist. It will be an error to equate Islam with extremism. But many people around the globe find it cumbersome to appreciate the difference between Islam and extremism. For example, Al Qaeda and ISIS are presenting the erroneous picture of Islam. Consequently, the soft image of Islam is tarnished to a great extent. Most of the people in the west are unaware of the true picture of Islam that it is a peaceful religion. In Islam there is no space for extremism and terrorism.

Another outcome of extremism is the renaissance of Islamophobia.

in Europe Islamophobia means a sense of hate and prejudice against Muslim on the basis of their religion Islam. Due to Islamophobia, Muslim are facing marginalization in the European countries. According to the PEW survey of 2017, young Muslim feel unsafe and fearful in America because of their origin. Even the United Nations approved the day of 15th March as 'the international day against Islamophobia' in order to spread awareness and to ensure the safety of Muslim and Islam in the world.

Furthermore, the incidents of blasphemy are increasing day by day due to extremist ideologies. Due to misunderstanding and blind following of commandments of so called religious custodians,

many of the young men • became
extreme - Due to extremism, they
have a very little space for
tolerance in their hearts. Any deviation
they see from their religious
norms, they take it as blasphemy.
And they think that the punishment
of blasphemy is taking life.
For example, it was the
extremist ideology which stirred
the mob to lynch Pymitha Kumara
on the allegation of blasphemy
in December, 2021 in Stalkot.

However, the menace of
extremism can be weeded out
through the projection of soft
image of Islam. The religious
leaders can do this by highlighting
the teachings of the Holy Quran.
As mentioned in Surah Al-
Baqarah (2:256), 'There is no
compulsion in religion, the right

path is now distinct from the erroneous path'. In addition to this, they should share the example of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) that he was known for his peaceful approach to conflict resolution. For instance, during the treaty of Hudaibiyah, he negotiated a peaceful resolution with his opponents. In this way, they can highlight that Islam is a religion that values education, creativity and reasoning. By doing these things, peaceful image of Islam will be promoted all over the world, and extremism against Muslim will be minimized.

Moreover, extremism can be minimized by the interfaith dialogues in order to establish peace. Interfaith dialogues help in understanding other religions. It promotes interfaith harmony. It

also creates a sense of tolerance for one another. For instance, Iran is a Shia dominant country while the kingdom of Saudi Arabia is Sunni dominant. Both fought proxy wars in the Middle Eastern countries on the basis of different sects. This thing increased sectarianism as well as extremism. But if the spiritual leaders from both sides sit on the dialogue table, and try to solve their issues through interfaith dialogues, then the peace will be the fate of the Middle East.

The religious leaders can also help in combating extremism by promoting the basic tenets of moderation and modernization of Islam. They should pinpoint how Islam talks about the importance of education. Education is the

core element of moderation and modernization. In addition to this, they should highlight how Islam talks about gender equality. Not only Islam talks about the gender equality but also it emphasizes the importance of science and technology. All these things show that Islam is a moderate religion. It has nothing to do with extremism. So by presenting the true picture of Islam, extremism can be mitigated to a great extent.

Another thing that the religious leaders can do is to disown the extremist groups and their false ideologies. They can use their position of influence to openly condemn extremist groups and their ideologies. By publicly denouncing extremist

groups, religious leaders can assist to wave their followers towards more affirmative and beneficial path. Moreover, religious leaders can also collaborate with law enforcement agencies to recognize and separate extremist groups. For instance, in the current scenario, Afghanistan's spiritual leaders can protect their country from the menace of extremist groups like TTP by disowning them. Likewise, the moderate Taliban scholars should convince the extremist groups to become peaceful instead of cracking down against women education, and depriving them from their rights. In this way, peace can be established in Afghanistan.

Furthermore, the religious leaders should spread global

awareness about how to live peacefully without hurting each other's religious sentiments. They can do this at local, national and international level with the help of print media, social media, and through their writings. They can promote the concept of forgiveness. This can help to reduce tensions and conflicts, and to promote great understanding between individuals and communities. For instance, there is a concept of unity and brotherhood in Islam, the religious leaders can help to build strong social bonds, and to promote empathy and compassion. They can also teach the concept of non-violence in Islam, and encourage people to reduce tensions. In this way, peace can be established.

Similarly, the religious leaders should teach about the status and rights of women. Women are the most marginalized segment in many of the Muslim countries due to the selfish interests of a few so called custodians of religion. Due to this reason, extremist views about Muslims are present in many of the western countries. The religious leaders can play a key role in mainstreaming women by preaching the rights of women. When women rights are ensured in the Muslim countries, then the soft image of the Muslim will build. For example, Afghan Taliban banned the higher education of women. They also took away the right of women to become the part of legislature. Therefore, Afghanistan's position on the

Global Gender Gap Index 2022 is worst. The spiritual leaders from all over the world should conduct dialogue with Afghan Taliban, and they should convince that Islam gives many rights, which they are taking away, to women. In this way, extremist view about Afghanistan in the West can be minimized.

Last but not the least, the religious leaders should teach about the beautiful personality of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). The Prophet (PBUH) was a great military strategist as well as a peacemaker. He preferred peace over war. Even he forbade the burning of green fields, contaminating of wells and killing of children, women and old men. He taught about

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forgiveness. For example, at the time of conquest of Makkah, he even forgave his worst enemies like Abu Sufyan. So the religious leaders by teaching the beauty of Prophet's (PBUH) personality, they can establish peace and counter extremism. They can also quote that how Prophet (PBUH) turned the land of war into Rajsā'i-Madina.

Sum and substance of the whole discussion is that extremism is caused by political use of religion, misuse of the Jihad spirit and biased literature. It has adverse impacts like increasing Islamophobia and blasphemy related incidents. However, the silver lining is that the religious leaders can play a key role in

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establishing peace and countering extremism. They can do this by conducting interfaith dialogues, projecting the soft image of Islam, disowning the extremist groups, searching the commonalities, preaching the rights of women, and teaching about the personality of Prophet (PBUH) as a peacemaker. In this way, the dark chapter of extremism can be closed, and the light of peace can be glittered.