Religious education and related challenges in the twenty first century

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Introduction:

The twenty first century has started with all its embedded challenges. These challenges have emerged in all fields. They will show their delicate and doubt raising presence in the realm of religious education accordingly.

This article contains four sections: in the first part, the fundamental challenge of the twenty first century is analyzed. Then taking the proper encounter with this challenge into account, the concept of religious education will then be investigated. This investigation is done in two separate ways. In one part the issue of the «concept of education» and in the other part the «concept of religion and being religious» are examined separately. Afterwards, we focus on the elementary issues of religion and being religious and finally we propose the fundamental topic of religious education in conformity with the fore mentioned challenge.

The challenge of the twenty first century for religious education.

We exist in a particular era where new features are emerging in comparison with the past. Every dynamic educational system moves its principles, methods, and functions out of a static state and

keeps its movement fresh and active according to environmental alterations. If an educational system applies a certain set of fixed principles and methods for all time and all places regardless of alteration in environmental conditions, it will be doomed to fail.

1. *«Deconceptualization» the most significant aspect of the challenge*

One of the most significant and possibly most important features of the present century is the emergence of the results of a process which has been referred to as a «communication revolution». Although this revolution has recently started, the present century serves as a stage for the emergence of its outcomes and repercussions. One noticeable and challenging aspect of this revolution is the attribute of «de conceptualization». Objective and conceptual ideas which we have so far undertaken and according to which we have organized our religious education will be confronted with the wave of de conceptualization. Consequently the system of religious education will be exposed to this unsteadiness. As a result of this de conceptualization contrasting facts and concepts begin to lose their essence. Of these contrasting factual and conceptual ideas, which have been of significance in moral and religious education, concepts of «far – near» and also «forbidden – permitted» can be pointed out.

The concept of «far – near» indicates spatial contrast, according to which places are divided into categories of far and near. This concept has so far been considered important in the realm of education especially in religious and moral education. That is because educational efforts have aimed at securing people by keeping them away from unpleasant environments and making

the actualization of education possible.

But in the communication era this contrast will gradually vanish. When this concept disappears, there will be no contrast between far and near anymore. This process has also been present in such simple means of communication as TV to some extent. For instance, a film or report which shows us realities about a distant place on earth has somehow actualized this de conceptualization. That is because spatial distances are not an obstacle in the way of accessibility and therefore spatial or time distances make no sense at all. This form of de conceptualization has been felt in computers and communication networks in greater intensity and higher quality. Since people cover time and distance passively in front of a TV and within the restriction of decision makers in charge of TV channels, this happens in computer networks actively and as a result of the user's own decision.

One noticeable and challenging aspect of the revolution for religious education is the attribute of «de conceptualization». Objective and conceptual ideas which we have so far undertaken and according to which we have organized our religious education will be confronted with the wave of de conceptualization.. Consequently the system of religious education will be exposed to this unsteadiness.

The concept of «forbidden – permitted» has also encountered de conceptualization. This concept has so far been a distinguishing factor educationally. In the past, parents used to not let their children watch violent or immoral scenes on TV, but concurrent with the development and expansion of the means of communication, the resistance to this concept is fading. The child who is watching

films or playing computer games will undoubtedly be exposed to violent scenes whether or not he wants to, and the process continues to the point where violence becomes rampant among children. The degree of this de conceptualization will be higher and more decisive concerning communicative computer networks. Consequently, the boundaries of forbidden and permitted will be covered and a number of previously forbidden affairs are presently permitted or inevitable, and circumstances are altered so that countless affairs are gradually and practically imposed.

Violation of the above mentioned boundaries and contrasting concepts hold supreme significance when it comes to religious and moral issues. Religious and moral education is seriously related to boundaries and limitations. Religious and moral education means, in one sense, determining limitations and making people familiar with them. Supposing there are no boundaries and man is allowed to do whatever he desires, under such conditions it is not feasible to even discuss religious and moral education. Morality is always mixed with dos and don'ts and these two are the keywords in the realm of moral education. Similarly within religious education terms such as «mandatory» and «forbidden» are considered keys to this education. This is where we come across the challenges of this century. Taking the feature of de conceptualization of this century into account, can one possibly raise the topic of moral and religious education in the era of communication? Basically, can the issue of moral and religious education be discussed, while accepting the communication era which, metaphorically, is similar to an uninvited or unexpected guest?

Some have admitted that secularism is an inevitable repercussion of this era, and religion and morality will gradually fade and lose

their attractiveness. This is an acceptable opinion only if religious education is modified to include weak and fading concepts. If this in fact becomes a reality, religious education as we know it will not survive instead it will transform and disappear. If religious education can actively be adjusted to new circumstances there is no reason for it to decline. The concept of «Boundary» has various meanings. One of which conveys the meaning of «quarantine boundary» which is basically the process of keeping people in a designated location so that they have no contact with any corrupted environment. The success in this method of religious education entails protecting these boundaries properly. Since we are in a de conceptualization era and information can be sent out and received everywhere, this method of religious education can not resist and will fail sooner or later.

Does religious education possess the capacity to play an effective role in this era? We respond to this question in the positive. In the continuation of this article, by analyzing the concepts of «education», «religion», and «being religious», we will try to present a different image of religious education such that it survives the demands of this century.

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2. *The concept of education and quasi education*

The overall image forming in the public's mind about «education» is the idea of «bringing about a desirable alteration

in a new generation». Does this conception make a distinction between education and quasi – education? The response is definitely in the negative. The concept of education is not only limited to creating a certain range of behaviors, states and thoughts in people, it also embeds how to bring about these circumstances.

An instructor does not only cause changes in a person's behavior and state, rather he ought to create insight to these changes in the person as well.

Three forms of quasi education can be named: «habit», «indoctrination» and «enforcement». These three forms entail particular methodological considerations, none of which exactly match education. By applying habit, indoctrination and enforcement, we can bring about desirable alterations in people. Although these kinds of alterations are desirable, being associated with particular methodological considerations are not judged to be education.

Habit is based on «repetition». By repeating a behavior (such as saying prayer), a habit is perpetuated within a person's nature. However not every congenial change is defined as education. Making a desired change in a person is also possible through indoctrination. Indoctrination is based on «solemnity». When a person accepts a saying or idea not because of it being sound and rational but because of the decorum of the speaker, he has actually undergone indoctrination. And finally, enforcement can be utilized to create desired changes as well. Enforcement is undoubtedly based on «force» which can be defined as the act of compelling people to perform a task and punishing them in case of violation.

However, enforcement is not considered to be «education». Habit, indoctrination, and enforcement are all forms of quasi education, and they ought not to be taken as education. It is feasible to make use of these three methods in the process of education now and then, or think of them as an introduction to «education». The point to be denied here is not these inevitable or minor forms, but the illusion that each of these three methods can be counted on as a fundamental base and body of education.

This article has so far been negative and explained «what is not included in education?» Now it is time to focus on «what is education and what are the required elements that are contained within it?» How can we make sure that congenial changes in the new generation are considered to be «educational»? Answering these questions, we will discuss four issues concerning education.

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2-1. *The issue of illustration*

The issue of illustration can be defined as the process of becoming aware of the changes that have occurred around you. In this manner the instructor does not only aim at bringing about changes in the person's behavior and state, rather he also needs to create insight towards these alterations within the person's nature.

This attribute makes a distinction between education and quasi education. The issue of illustration is not required in the three forms of quasi education. None of the methods of habit,

indoctrination, and enforcement entails providing illustration. In the process of education the learner is encouraged to ask if he does not understand a certain concept. This questioning is not passive, rather it is active. We do not wait for the person to come up with a question, rather the process of education per se guarantees illustration. The instructor ought to think of this point as an aspect of his educational personality to give illustrations concerning the change he is about to bring about. Thus education necessitates the process of illustration between two poles namely the instructor and learner. This attribute is what differentiates education from quasi education.

There can be a difference made between «illustration» and «knowledge». Knowledge is information which is acquired in such scientific fields as physics or psychology however illustration is to provide the learner with the insight toward the essence of the necessity of the alteration which he is about to undergo.

2-2. *The issue of criterion*

This issue is actually the expansion of the previous one (illustration). The domain of illustration expands from clarifying the reason and necessity of a specific behavior or state to obtaining general rules and criteria. Rules and criteria are abstract formulas according to which deeds and behaviors are evaluated. Criteria can determine any pleasant or unpleasant situation in the process of education.

Education entails appropriate criteria to the learner. Not only should he be aware of the reason and necessity of the behavior or state which is being created in him, but also he should comprehend the general rules of pleasant and unpleasant affairs in the process

of education to be provided with the possibility of evaluation. Criterion makes him understand the distinction between desirable and undesirable behavior, so that he can recognize that behavior wherever it emerges from. This issue also assists in the differentiation between education and quasi education. Criterion is not determined in the methods of habit, indoctrination and enforcement. Furthermore, there may sometimes be an insistence where one will need to keep the rules and criteria hidden. However education necessitates illustration and determines criteria. The vision and insight of the learner serves as support for him. There is nothing hidden between the instructor and learner during the process of education. Criteria are stated and illustrated reciprocally, and the learner becomes aware of them. These criteria are presently part of education.

If criticism is really practiced in the realm of education, instructors will no longer be the manifestation of merit, virtue, and justice.

2-3. *The issue of internal motivation*

The third fundamental issue in the concept of education is internal motivation within the learner. It is abundantly clear that the real source of power in the process of habit, indoctrination and enforcement is to motivate the learner. In the process of education, the stimuli for motivating the learner are found within his own nature. The differentiation between education and quasi education resembles the difference between water found in a well as opposed to water that has been filled in a pool. Both of them contain water, but the difference lies in the obtaining of the water. One of them is a natural source of water, while the other relies on an outside

source. Education is a process in which an awakening ought to occur within the learner's essence and show him how to behave, how to think and what attributes to possess.

2-4. *The issue of criticism*

We have, up until now, determined that education entails illustration, determining the criteria and internal motivation which brings us to the fourth issue namely criticism. One of the essential requirements in the process of education is the emergence of criticism specifically the instructor being criticized by a learner. As soon as the learner has experienced the three issues that have been discussed thus far, he now becomes ready to criticize the instructor. Criteria play a crucially significant role in particular. That is because they can be applied in any case and one can judge and evaluate the situations based on the extent they match the criteria. There is no distinction between an instructor and a learner in this regard. This rule covers both the instructing and learning generation.

The second issue in religiosity is internal experience. Internal experience represents internal passions and excitement. Such concepts as fear, hope, reliance on God and prayer which are seen in various religions as well as Islam convey the meaning of internal experience.

This attribute is also different in education and quasi education. Since no criterion is determined in the methods of habit, indoctrination and enforcement, the possibility to criticize does not exist. Defining education in such a way where one allows criticism the opportunity to emerge criticizing the previous generations

won't be something that is out of reach. This process will pave the way for the alteration of the new generation, and that is how the process of education remains dynamic. Although it is the previous generation that hands the criteria over to the new generation, since they are not easily and immediately actualized, there will be a vivid gap between the criteria and their actualization. Having these criteria on hand, the new generation will be provided with the appropriate tools to criticize.

The point to be clarified by the previous generation is whether it is actually educating people or simply being habitual. If criticism is really practiced in the realm of education, instructors will no longer be the manifestation of merit, virtue, and justice. Instructors are extremely worried about blighting the education system and its environment with deficiencies. But the fact is that considering the issue of criticizing, no instructor is required to be clear of all deficiencies. Thus both instructor and learner are included in the process of education.

3. *The concept of religiosity*

Any discussion on a person becoming religious will always point to the concept of changes that one sees within himself. There are four important and fundamental points in the field of religiosity (becoming religious).

3 – 1. *Doctrinal and mental issue*

Alterations that ought to occur in someone within the realm of religiosity include the idea of achieving certain tenets of religious doctrine such as believing in the existence and oneness of God, believing in resurrection, prophet hood and so on. The

emergence of such beliefs in someone ought to be associated with comprehension and an inner vision. For this reason it is said that beliefs are investigative not imitative. Vision is relative, depending on people and the eras that they exist in. There exists a variance among people in the case of knowledge and the level of their comprehension. Nevertheless, various levels of vision in beliefs can be observed among all walks of life even the most common. Relativity can b found within people's visions concerning the tenets of religious doctrine. That is because various questions and areas of uncertainty are posed in different eras and setting the beliefs also varies accordingly. The fundamental essence is the same, but their emergence and how they appear is different. Beliefs are adjusted in conformity with current situations and circumstances. No one can ignore the features of the era he is living in.

3- 2. *The issue of internal experience*

The second issue in religiosity is internal experience. The element of «compassion» is remarkably effective when discussing the issue of internal experience. Internal experience represents internal passions and excitement. Such concepts as fear, hope, reliance on God and prayer which are seen in various religions as well as Islam convey the meaning of internal experience.

Congenial changes are possible within those individuals who apply habit, indoctrination and enforcement. Although desirable, being associated with particular methodological considerations, these alterations are not considered to be educational.

People in the realm of religiosity adjust their internal experiences to point towards God. The one possessing insight toward his tenets

of religious doctrine – in both the present era and himself – is not considered to be religious unless he experiences these states in the process of his religiosity.

3-3. *The issue of internal commitment*

The third issue in religiosity is internal commitment. The distinction between internal commitment and internal experience lies in the fact that the elements of compassion and excitement emerge in the field of internal experience while the noteworthy element in internal commitment is «choice». One of the requirements to be religious is the emergence of this aspect in human nature. One ought to be internally committed to both God and his own expectations.

3 – 4. *The issue of deed*

Finally the last element of religiosity is deed. One cannot be known to be religious unless he performs deeds in accordance with his beliefs and faith. The repetition of the phrase «those who believe and do» in numerous Quranic verses represents the fact that a faithful person is required to perform deeds in the realm of devotion, morality and societal.

We can come to this conclusion that a pious person possesses four attributes: belief, internal experience, internal commitment and deed. There will be a deficiency in someone's religiosity if he lacks one of these attributes.

4. *Religious education in the twenty first century*

Now having discussed both education and religiosity, we can

now examine the combination of these two, namely «religious education». Four issues of education are illustration, determining the criteria, internal motivation and criticism. Religiosity includes four issues within itself namely: belief, internal experience, internal commitment and deed. Religious education as a combination conveys the meaning that the issues discussed in religiosity be actualized educationally and in conformity with the four attributes of education.

In religious education the instructor ought to consider rationality as the base religion, although this by no means is an easy task to perform in the communication era. Tenets of religious doctrine have encountered particular areas of uncertainty in this era.

There is definitely a union that exists between education and religiosity. For example, the issue of «belief» in the realm of religiosity with the issue of «illustration» and «supplying the criteria» in the field of education can be seen as a convergence. As mentioned earlier religious belief necessitates vision and comprehension. Furthermore, «internal experience» and «internal commitment» in the field of religiosity and «internal motivation» in the realm of education converge. In spite of the existence of various forms of convergence, the issues of religiosity may possibly succeed in actualizing educational attributes. This actualization is not considered to be religious education. In other words the process of making people religious can culminate in quasi education.

It is possible to make religious deeds habitual for people or enforce them to perform these deeds. The effort to enforce such deeds on others is called quasi education. But the reality is that

religiosity and religious education do not converge and we are not allowed to mix them with quasi education.

4-1. *The issue of rationality*

One of the fundamental issues in religious education is «rationality» which necessitates two concepts of education and religiosity. Religious education needs to be rational in this day and age. This need arises from the fact that the exchange of various information and points of view are done with the slightest effort in the communication era, and can possibly culminate in the emergence of numerous questions and doubts concerning authority and the validity of the religion. If piousness and religious education is expected to survive such intricate circumstances, it ought to have a reasonable and accepted identity and not be realized as a taste based task.

Religious education enjoys a rational identity whether referring to beliefs and morality or to religious rituals and rules. Rationality's role is quite significant in the area of beliefs. Rationality has a clear presence in ideological principles. In religious education, an instructor is required to base fundamental principles of religion on rationality, although this is not an easy task to perform in the communication era. This era has confronted religious beliefs with very taxing questions. Questions arising from such ideas as pluralism, post modernity and so on have challenged religious beliefs. To encounter these questions, religious education is required to be rational and reasonable. In this manner it is understood how complicated religious education is. Having an awareness of the complexity of the questions that many people of this era may have while putting forth an effort to prove religious beliefs and at the

same time discarding misunderstandings concerning religious instructions are just some of the obvious reasons why the area of religious education is so complex and thus the role of the instructor so heavy. As a matter of fact religious education has always been a heavy burden and has encountered particular predicaments in various eras. Pointing to this complexity while addressing the Holy Prophet (pbuh), God says in the Holy Quran:

«We will cast upon them a weighty word» Enwrapped (Mozammel): 5.

The Holy Quran is said to contain a weighty word since conducting that and guiding people is extremely difficult. A true teacher is the one who practices religious education effectively and exposes himself to a diversity of ideas and illustrates rationality and religious instructions.

«We will cast upon them a weighty word» Enwrapped ». [1]

The Holy Quran is said to contain a weighty word since conducting that and guiding people is extremely difficult.

In addition to religious beliefs, religious morality is also required to be based on rational principles that need to be illustrated. Each moral virtue enjoys a rational dimension which is to be emphasized. This rational aspect is observable in the realm of religious rules and acts. This point is also true concerning imitating the authority of a Mujtahid.

Although imitation is sometimes misunderstood due to its association with blind and reprehensible imitation, its rational dimension can be illustrated. The first duty of every pious person is

1.Holy Qur'an: Surah Muzammil: 5.

to recognize religious rules and act accordingly. When a person is not capable enough to do that, he ought to refer to a specialist in this field, just like other social affairs, and benefit from his diagnosis, and perform in conformity with his rulings. The criterion to select such an expert is determined in a narration by Imam Mahdi (May God Hasten His Reappearance):

«Among jurists, the one who has kept himself safe, and has guarded his faith, and has opposed carnal desires, and has obeyed his Imam, ought to be obeyed by other people.»

Rationality is one of the elements of religious education in the current era. This element is true in all aspects of religion and religious education including beliefs, morality and religious rules and acts.

Insight and vision that is found in a learner stimulates education. There is nothing hidden between an instructor and a learner in the process of education. The criteria are illustrated reciprocally.

4-2. *The issue of piety in presence*

The second issue in religious education in accordance with the current era is «piety in presence». Piety is sometimes possible through abstinence. Accepting the religious education to be based on this type of piety, we can expect the emergence of quarantine education in which protecting people is possible only when they exist in a separate area, away from a corrupted environment.

Piety appears in another form as well, which can be attributed to a concept called «piety in presence» which is in contrast with

«piety in abstinence». Taking the features of the present era into account along with the emergence of communication in an ever expanding form, piety in abstinence will eventually become practically impossible. Conditions that are imposed on us deprive us of the opportunity to abstain. However, piety in presence is still very possible. This type of piety is a substantial issue in religious education and should not to be neglected. Piety in presence provides a concept beyond boundaries and restrictions. In the realm of piety in abstinence, boundaries are defined «spatially» while in the field of piety in presence the idea of «power and ability» is conveyed.

According to this concept, our comprehension of religious education necessitates living in society and being engaged in communication. The Prophets (peace be upon them) conducted their religious education in the heart of society – amongst men. Religious education was initiated from the rigged social circumstances in their era.

Therefore, taking «internal evolution» and «internal commitment» into account and aiming for piety in presence to be the ultimate outcome, it can be said that the topic of religious education, even in the worst social conditions, can be discussed and eventually applied. The communication era, along with its challenges, does not deter religious education. In fact we see that religious education is resisting these difficulties and moving towards answering the challenge.

4 – 3. *The issue of evaluation, selection and rejection*

The third issue in religious education is the combination of evaluation, selection and rejection. This element acts as support for the concept of piety in presence. Active presence requires

evaluation of social information and events. This element is specifically rooted in the issue of criticism in education.

Evaluation and criticism entail recognition of both positive and negative aspects of the current era. It is by no means possible to reject everything belonging to this era although there are some dimensions of the preset age that are simply not desirable. Full scale rejection will eventually bring about full scale acceptance. If religious education fully rejects everything related to the present era, it will leave an unfair image of itself.

Whenever religion has faced rigged social conditions, criticism associated with selection and rejection has been the result. The documents ratified by the Holy Prophet (pbuh) in Mecca are the result of such a critical approach.

Religious education, according to this, is always required to have a fair evaluation and criticism, facing novel events in this era to get people prepared to either select or reject. Learning how to encounter certain events is claimed to be the most significant way to have an effective presence in the heart of every situation.

Reasonable criticism associated with sufficient evidence, in addition to determining advantages and usefulness of the means of communication, provides the person ample opportunity to evaluate. Not only should this evaluation occur generally, but it should also be a progressive tool for particular cases. A group discussion surrounding a movie or a computer program in class can be an example of this type of evaluation. Discussing positive and negative aspects of such cases brings about a balanced approach in people's mind. However, simply discussing one side of the issue can result in disturbing effects.

The first duty of every pious person is to recognize religious rules and act accordingly

5. *Conclusion*

Out of what has so far been discussed, it is concluded that religious education faces challenges in the twenty first century. Of the most vital aspects of this challenge is the attribute of de conceptualizing. This attribute can be defined as the existing of contrasting concepts and situations in the areas of morality and religion. An example of this can be the contrast that exists between «forbidden – permitted» and «far – near». Encountering this challenge necessitates proper comprehension of religious education. This is why we discussed the concept of religion and education separately and considered the attributes of religious education in conformity with the obtained results. According to this, education was defined via four issues: illustration, determining the criteria, internal motivation and criticism. Thus a distinction can be made between education and quasi education – a form of education which includes the following aspects: habit, indoctrination and enforcement. A four issue framework was also defined for religiosity as being: belief, internal experience, internal commitment and deed.

The idea of religious education requires religiosity to be formed in accordance with educational communication. Providing the issues of education including: rationality in various fields of beliefs, morality and religious deeds and rules, piety in presence versus piety in abstinence, and evaluation associated with selection and rejection. Providing these attributes in religious education exists, religious education has the opportunity to encounter the challenges of the present century.

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