

Massoud Ansari

A comparative study of how churches in the West became positive and constructive agents of change and whether mosques and madrassas in the Muslim world can similarly transform

Threat of religious fanaticism is becoming increasingly recognized as an important issue for public policy to address, especially in the context of a stronger re-emergence of the forces of extremism into public sphere in connection with the concerns and experience of the unarmed people who like to live with a peace. The horrendous acts of terrorism of 9/11 in the US and the events followed afterwards, including the fall of the Taliban government in Afghanistan and overthrowing of Saddam government in Iraq, have further complicated the global security environment.

On the one hand, the global war of the US to hunt-down these forces of darkness or Al-Qaeda fugitives is continuing, while on the other, there seems to be no end to terrorism activities especially the suicide bombing attacks, which for sure, has become one of the most deadly weapons of this new age.

As a journalist, working for one of the leading newsmagazines in Pakistan and writing for a host of foreign publications, I had a chance to interact with these extremist groups hundreds of times. However, I was stunned when the owner of my apartment who works for a multi-national company in Saudi Arabia said there is a whole lot of demand for technocrats from the Pakistan in Saudi Arabia because majority of westerners working there have already left their jobs and have gone back to their respective countries, because they are no longer feeling secure.

Many big questions are continued to perturb the people of the world community including where this world is heading? Has the war of civilization already started? Will the confidence of the common people who wish to travel like a free bird be restored? Has the new millennium finally divided the world into two separate worlds i.e. one for the Muslims and another for the westerners!

Given the geo-political location of the country and the only Islamic nuclear state, Pakistan, I reckon, has a very strong role to play in the on-going struggle of the world community to restore the world peace.

Mysticism and religious tolerance had always been an intrinsic part of life in specially interior of Pakistan. Traditionally, in the ideological divide between the religious clergy and the mystics, the latter had always played a more significant role. But the events that followed in the wake of invasion of Afghanistan by former the USSR, unfortunately, it has become a hot bad of Islamic militancy.

Obviously there are many factors involved but one main reason that is continued to flare up the religious intolerance and militancy are the hundreds and thousands of the religious seminaries spread across the country.

Majority of the students at the seminaries belong to poor families, and some are orphans. They survive on charity meals, endure corporal punishment and at times suffer the torment of being chained to prevent them from escaping the premises. It is easy for children of poverty-stricken families to end up at these centers, for not only are they provided free meals and clothing, they are also given cash handouts for their families.

In our part of the world, a mullah was someone who washed the dead, not a job you'd much admire. As a child, I do remember these children used to collect meals from door-to-door and the rich people giving them poor due with the hope that they would pray for the prosperity in return! These institutions used to be considered as a place of peace and enlightenment, where the students were taught the lessons of *la ikra fideen* (There is no compulsion in the religion) and *Lakum deenakum walie deen* (Your religion is with you, while my religion is with me) (THESE ARE VERSES FROM THE QURAN).

In the good old days – logic was the first thing that these seminaries used to teach to the students ones they get admission. *Ijtihad* or reasoning was the bases of Islamic teachings, which unfortunately is no more the case. These students were taught to do reasoning to guide the Muslims in the right direction and in accordance with the necessities of changing times.

For example, Quran says, Liquor is forbidden in Islam... Since it has only mentioned "Liquor" – does it mean that one is allowed to use cocaine or hashish or heroin for that matter. This is where the reasoning comes: the students were taught that liquor meaning intoxication and any thing that drives you out of your senses is forbidden.

The reason or *Ijtihad* that was the core of the religious has unfortunately taken a backseat. For example, the same religious clergy that talks about Koranic punishment of 40 lashes over the use of liquor is into selling heroin. And there reasoning is simple: "Koran has mentioned liquor and not the heroin!"

When I was doing a story recently, I remember meeting some of the religious clerics both in Afghanistan and tribal areas in Pakistan who had issued even a religious decree, "Cultivating poppy is not forbidden in Islam." Even some of them, I met, even were encouraging people to grow more and more poppy so that it could be used as 'atom bomb' against the west, particularly the US.

These mullahs talk about stoning people to death if found guilty of womanizing – but for them sodomizing a boy is allowed! Many of these Mullahs or the religious clergy are into boys instead because they say that Quran has disallowed sex with the woman outside your marriage and not forbidden directly sodomizing boys!

Unfortunately, the clergy pick up straight lines from the Quran, twist as it suits them and propagate it further amongst their students. I agree that you are allowed in Islam to take a revenge (tit-for-tat) and but the Koran says to forgive is even a better deed. When you talk to them privately these propagators of 'blind jihad' would tell you that killing of innocent reporter Daniel Pearl was wrong or for that matter they won't justify the atrocities faced by those innocents who died when the twin-towers collapsed but back to their pupils they would give it twist and would tell their pupil that it all is a conspiracy of the Jews and we all have to prepare ourself to fight against them.

The beard of the students in these religious seminaries had always been considered as a symbol peace in the wake of the cold war and especially the Russian invasion of Afghanistan. But situation changed dramatically and today the same beard has become the symbol of terrorism. All the teachings of peace are today replaced with the teachings of intolerance in the form of distorted versions of jihad or the holy war. Majority of the students you speak to whether in a madrassah in Karachi or in Lahore or elsewhere, they generally see west as enemy of Islam, which is being led by the USA and is dictated by the Zionists. These students believe that Zionists are engaged in a conspiracy to defame the religious schools by dubbing them as bases of militancy and none of them are ready to acknowledge that the knowledge they impart in these seminaries in no more valid. The role of the madrassah and Mulla in Pakistan has overtly changed in the past few decades. Till 80s', the idea of keeping weapons inside the madrassah was unthinkable and the ventures of madrassah students in any kind of bloody conflicts, whether fought at the home ground or at the international turf was unheard off.

This was the time when young seminary students, mainly orphans or coming from impoverished backgrounds, would be seen going door to door to collect the meals, while some of the rich in these areas would give them some money from their annual poor due (Zakaat) to enable them to run the paltry affairs of the madrassah. The issues pertaining to Sunnis or Shias as the "true harbingers" of Islam were usually discussed amongst the religious scholars and were never the issues to be discussed by the common men on the street.

But the role of Mulla was dramatically changed when these seminaries were converted into nurseries to draw cadres for the holy war inside Afghanistan as well as to fight an ideological battle of Saudi's "Salafi version Islam" verses Iranian "Shiite" Islam. This was the time when tones of money was pumped in for the first time in these seminaries to prepare young jihadists to be used as a cannon fodder in the various conflicts. While, the CIA money flowed into to these madrassahs in the wake of Russia's occupation of Afghanistan and hundreds of new madrassahs were opened with the state sponsorship, which supplied them plots at prime locations, to supply the warriors inside Afghanistan. During this period the madrassah sector grew at an explosive rate and some reports suggest the number of madrassahs till 1979 was hardly between 1,500 to 1,700 in the first thirty years' of country's independence but it shot up to a whopping roughly between 16,000 to 20,000 in the other half of the country's age.

According to some statistics, today in Pakistan the number of the high schools is roughly 16,059 against between 16,000 to 20,000 madrassahs. The total high school student population stands at 3.2 million while madrassah students are estimated at 1.5 million. Interestingly, Islamabad, the country's federal capital, has by far the highest number of madrassahs per square kilometer in the country. It has 127 seminaries teaching 16,000 students.

Not only the CIA financed these madrassahs, but truckloads of funds were supplied to these madrassahs by Saudis (who are doing it till today) as well as Saddam Hussain of Iraq who were engaged in a full-fledged war with Iran in early 80s and wanted to counter Iranian influence in its neighbouring Pakistan. As a matter of fact, Pakistan fought two proxy wars, one was America's war against Russia inside Afghanistan, while yet another was an ideological battle of Sunni and Shia divide between Iranians verses Saudis and Iraqis and Pakistan became its ideological battleground.

This was the time when almost every madrassah in the country was either provided with official guards or armed licenses to protect each other's scholars because students of these religious school were often seen fighting with each other. Even if the clouds of cold war are completely disappeared, while Iran-Iraq war is history, but the funds from the oil-rich gulf states and Saudis are continued to fill the coffers of these madrassahs. The larger donations also come from rich in Pakistan who used to give their annual poor due to the poor in their vicinity, but now donate most of it these schools.

As a matter of fact, one main reason that madrassahs today do not want to change its present posture and give up teaching the obsolete version of the religion, because it has more to do with a "madrassah economy" and these madrassahs today have become a multi-billion dollar enterprise, where those who run these madrassahs do nothing, but still they are able to earn truckloads of money through donations.

Given that most of these funds comes from hidden sources or unnamed donors, it is highly difficult for any one to audit it. And also no body knows whether these Mullas buy guns or vehicles or buy themselves tickets to do politics from the funds which are mainly given to them in charity to feed the poor. Most of these clerics do not have any business, but still majority of them are seen plying in the aircrafts or in fancy chauffer-driven cars.

Whenever the issue of madrassah reforms is brought into question the government always try to evade its responsibility saying that they would need massive funds to reform these madrassahs. However, none of them have realized that the money donated in charities in Pakistan, if it is confidence level of the donor is developed and this money is properly collected and channelized, they could always do wonders.

The Pakistan Centre for Philanthropy has calculated five years ago a sum of Rs 70.5 billion was donated by the Pakistanis towards philanthropic causes. This figure must have grown since. In additional to this, according to a rough estimates, approximately three billion rupees is be donated by the Pakistanis as Fitra on the auspicious occasion of Eid-ul-Fitr and additional seven billion rupees are collected when the pious sacrifice animal

and donate hides on the eve of Eid-ul-Uzha. If one were to add to that what people dole out to beggars on the street and the money the devout voluntarily deposit in the donation boxes in mosques, Imambargahs, and mazars — mostly unaccounted for — philanthropy alone generated in Pakistan would emerge as a venture which generates probably more than what the government collects as revenue as from direct and indirect taxes! In addition to this, the philanthropy by Pakistani diaspora in the USA, UK and other western countries of worth several billion rupees come to Pakistan.

Because there are huge stakes involved in the business, the religious clergy would love to maintain statuesque and accuse all those as stooges of the “west”, whenever they talk about the madrassah reforms. Various attempts of the government to “mainstream” madrassah curricula through introduction of a range of non-religious classes have also proved futile, with most madrassas refusing to cooperate with very modest reforms.

I think the Holy Quran was memorized in the earliest periods of Islam when they needed to preserve it. However, when billions of copies are already printed and the Holy Quran is preserved, they ask the logic of memorizing the Quran to its students. The clergy is continued to perform the task of isolating the children through a “sealing process” represented by true Islamic teachings, then brainwashing them with doctrines no longer valid.

The way they run these seminaries today, those who graduate from these religious schools do not have any marketable skills except being readied to serve at mosques and religious schools. This is in contrast to the madrassah education imparted some fifty years back or so which prepared students for entry into the mainstream education system and onto gainful employment. The current education of exclusion makes those who graduate from religious schools frustrated and angry. This is not about terrorism. It is about thousands of young men and women who, due to the financial and social set up that they are born in, are being readied to serve only as religious teachers and assistants.

Through this scholarship I like to study some of the areas in which the religious institutions in the west were transformed into more productive segments of the society. For example, if we review the history of the institution of Jaanisari in the Turkish Empire, we would learn that it was the most effective system of education of war orphans by any State in the history and it could always provide us a guidance to offer a parallel institute to both the impoverished as well as the orphans in the country.

As a matter of fact these were orphans, mostly non-Muslim kids, who were afforded the best possible education money could by in schools run through the patronage of the Sultan himself. These kids were, then based upon their innate talents, selected for service to the Sultan in either the Military or Bureaucracy. The life of these Jaanisaris was considered so great, that often Muslim parents would leave their infants at the doors to be picked up the institution, knowing that one day their son would end up in a prized position within the State.

Similarly the institute of church was transformed into more productive institute when the nuns were used to run the convent schools. Ironically, the convent schools even today are considered to be the best schools in Pakistan.

The reason I'm interested in doing this research because I had been to hundreds (at least 300) of these religious schools both in Pakistan and Afghanistan. I have spoken to the heads of these institutions as well as students and have tried to understand their mindset. One thing I'm quite confident that if we could come up with strong parallel answer to madrassah, we could alone do a great service to the humanity. Trust me, bombing one school like they recently did in Islamabad is no answer, we really have to come up with some solid proposal. The "chocolate war" launched these religious seminaries through the state machinery is no answer. I think the use of force or tit-for-tat attitude is not only dividing the world and in a way we are furthering the cause of these militants instead of minimizing the threat.

For example when Bin Laden launched his terrorist outfit in early 90s' he set up for himself few goals and one of his main objectives was a polarization between the west and the Muslim world. He actually predicted this kind of polarization at the time when it was highly unlikely. But the way the world community reacted after 9/11 incidents world today stands polarized the way he wanted. It is more Bin Laden theory of dividing the world that is working and nothing else...

The mushroom growth of the religious school and the indoctrination of the little toddlers may be a cause of immediate concern for Pakistani society but they could ultimately endanger the world peace.

Through this scholarship I like to answer questions such as role of religious seminaries or madrassas in Pakistan and how they have evolved over time to become breeding grounds for the militancy as well as bases for international terrorism. The project would mainly focus on the role of these schools in violent confrontation and how these schools could be reformed.