[**Sectarian conundrums**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1712694/sectarian-conundrums)

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SOCIAL cohesion has been a real concern in many parts of Pakistan. In this connection, among other factors, religious education is generally seen as a major contributor to social divides along sectarian identities. Therefore, the present situation necessitates an effective educational response through a methodological shift pertaining to teaching about Islam.

The purpose of religious education, as Andrew Wright suggests in Religious Education in the Secondary School: Prospects for Religious Literacy, is to produce “religiously literate individuals” who demonstrate commitment to their own traditions while respecting fellow citizens’ religious worldviews. In Pakistan, however, religious education does not seem to serve this essential purpose because of its majoritarian bent towards the teaching of Islam.

In a religiously diverse society, a dogmatic approach to religious education may not yield positive results as it tends to generate unsustainable generalisations based on a particular interpretation of Islam. Hence, such religious education appears to promote what is called ‘religious illiteracy’ among learners who neglect the rich diversity within Islam and beyond. More disturbingly, religious illiteracy renders itself to condemnation of diversity, intolerance and violence.

In Pakistan, curricular and pedagogical methods tend to present Islam from an exclusive doctrinal lens. For example, the curricula around religious education depicts Islam, as Madiha Afzal notes in Pakistan Under Siege: Extremism, Society and State, from a specific theological point of view in an erroneous attempt to create a uniform national identity. Unfortunately, such content, as Hussein Rashid argues, creates “a normative Islam against which other Muslims are measured”. Equally, it is argued that the existing curricula about Islam cultivates mutual misunderstandings among students by creating strict binaries of ‘true’ or ‘false’ and ‘right’ or ‘wrong’. These binaries result in sectarian bigotry and disturb social harmony.

A cultural studies’ approach may promote religious harmony.

In addition to the exclusive curricula, most religious educators, as Javed Ali Kalhoro and Alexander Cromwell maintain in Teaching Peace and Conflict, are unable to rise above their own devotional prejudices and therefore project an essentialised notion of Islam through their classroom teaching practices. This teacher-centred pedagogy leads to a homogeneous and ahistorical representation of Islam. Here, students are presented a simplified version of Islam by inaccurately equating it with a certain politically dominant narrative. Thus, the existing teaching about Islam serves the purposes of power rather than facilitating a critical engagement with Muslim traditions.

So, sectarianised religious education develops, according to Tariq Rahman, a rejectionist mindset among learners who display intolerant, uncritical, and self-righteous attitudes that usually harm interfaith harmony.

In order to promote religious literacy and harmony, a cultural studies approach, as suggested by Prof Dianne Moore, may be beneficial as it entails a non-sectarian and multidisciplinary methodology towards Islam as a civilisation. Unlike the sectarian approach, it emphasises not only the devotional aspects but also covers the sociopolitical, economic, artistic, cultural and intellectual endeavours of Muslim communities historically as well as in contemporary times.

For example, it highlights the fundamental beliefs that all Muslim communities share; it also situates notions of authority and leadership that mark them as distinct from one another. Accordingly, a cultural studies approach reflects similarities as well as distinctions among Muslim schools of thought to celeb­rate the commonalities and to appreciate the differences.

In addition, a cultural studies ap­­proach tries to portray Islam as a dynamic religion instead of one frozen in a certain time and place. In contrast to the sectarian approach, it does not remove Islam from the flows of history and human agency. Instead it endeavours to demonstrate that Islam has emerged and progressed in relation to varying sociopolitical and historical contexts. In this way, Islam is understood historically, critically and contextually, in order to better situate it in the present times in terms of its diverse expressions.

Indeed, promoting religious literacy is one of the effective ways of addressing the challenges of social cohesion in Pakistan. This requires a robust religious education system. In fact, the desired goal can be attained through a pluralistic representation of Islam as a civilisation in conjunction with improving educators’ pedagogy. The transformative curricular and pedagogical improvements can create favourable learning opportunities to help learners grow positively as individuals, as members of their communities and society, and of humanity at large.

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