

## Article

# Exploring the Potential of Religious Literacy in Pakistani Education

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Received: 7 June 2019; Accepted: 12 July 2019; Published: 15 July 2019



**Abstract:** Religious education is a compulsory subject in Pakistani schools in which students learn basic knowledge about Islam without exploring the sectarian differences between each sect of Islam. The division of Muslims into Sunni and Shia and the further division of Sunni Muslims into different sects has caused massive sectarian violence in Pakistan. This study uses qualitative methods to explore the possibility of engaging with religious literacy and religious education to explain the purpose, contents, and practical application of religious education and to mitigate existing challenges linked to religion in Pakistan. Even though religious education does not support sectarian differences, individual opinions about sectarian differences are still a major component of divisiveness in Pakistani society. Through interviews with 25 teachers from different levels of education (six primary school teachers, five high school teachers, five college teachers, five university teachers, and four religious school teachers), in this article, I argue that teachers of religious education in schools are neither following a common faith in teaching religious education nor are they in full agreement on providing equal rights to all students of different religious beliefs. Rather, most believe in their personal ideology centered on their own particular religious sect that largely rejects the concept of religious literacy. There is a need for evaluation and improvement of the teaching and learning of religion in schools in order to explain misperceptions about its practical application as well as to engage religious education with diversity.

**Keywords:** religious literacy; religious education; Pakistan; Islamic sects

## 1. Introduction

“I think, the concept of religious literacy is very interesting, especially in societies that have witnessed violence, conflicts and politics over the issue of religion [ . . . ] but I don’t think our society and many teachers (and also people) in our society agree to adopt it in education.”

This was a reflection of one primary school teacher about his perspective on the concept of religious literacy in classrooms in Pakistan. Although he accepts religious literacy in his classroom, his views reveal a situation of conflict for social cohesion and religious inclusion when people personally engage with others who have different religious beliefs. This is particularly interesting in the case of students, because they construct their personal ideas and develop their personal sense of belonging and social associations in school (Brown and Rose 1995). This reflection was one of many voices that I encountered in this study with the aim of seeking religious literacy in a society that claims to be built and united on religious beliefs but has also witnessed religious conflicts and violence between different religious groups as well as between different groups within the same religion. This study aims to explore the concept of religious literacy as perceived by school teachers in Pakistan and how religious literacy can help Pakistani students in building strong social cohesion and religious inclusion by understanding religious literacy as a part of religious education, which is compulsory for all Muslim students in Pakistan.

Religion is a compulsory part of every citizen's life in Pakistan, and the Constitution of Pakistan provides freedom to all citizens under Article 20 to profess their religion and manage their religious institutions. The population of Pakistan is 97% Muslim, whereas the remaining 3% includes Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, Zoroastrians, Baha'is, Buddhists, Jews, and Ahmadis. Despite religious pluralism, incidents of religious conflict have become very common. Religious conflicts in the form of hatred, difference of opinion, violence, and extremism are not limited to believers of different religions, but they also occur within and between majority and minority Muslim groups ([Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies 2014](#)). Academic institutions have also witnessed such religious conflicts and violent acts. The answers to such conflicts in society, as well as in schools, are of great importance, particularly as schools play an important role in building the characteristics and ideas of students in Pakistan.

The concept of 'religious literacy' is commonly understood as relevant knowledge about world religions, the capacity to recognize the life practices of people with different beliefs, the ability to understand the diversity of each religion, and the ability to benefit during interactions with believers of different religions. Religious literacy is a widely discussed and well-researched topic in Western Europe and the United States (US; [Jackson 1997](#); [Wright 1993](#); [Moore 2007](#); [Dinham and Francis 2016](#)). The basic concept of religious literacy is similar to the concepts of other types of literacy that are required for peaceful societies, such as the notions of 'cultural literacy' by [Hirsch \(1988](#); also cited by [Dinham and Shaw 2017](#)) and 'political literacy' by [Crick and Porter \(1978\)](#). [Wright \(1993\)](#) defines religious literacy as an ability to reflect, communicate, and act in an informed, intelligent, and sensitive manner toward the phenomenon of religion. [Davie \(2015a\)](#) refers to it using the metaphor of the ability to read and write—an understanding of the grammar, rules, vocabularies, and narratives about religions and beliefs. However, religious literacy is a very new concept in the Pakistani context, one that has not yet been debated in scholarly research. The presence of Islam within the educational curriculum ([Ahmad 2004](#); [Ahmad 2007](#)) and the practice of Islam in society ([Syed et al. 2016](#)) are two different realities that are present in Pakistani society. Conflict among different religious groups takes on different dimensions: between Muslim and non-Muslim; between Shia Muslim and Sunni Muslim; and between Sunni-Bralvi Muslims, Sunni-Deobandi Muslims, and Sunni-Salafi Muslims. The knowledge provided in educational textbooks has eliminated multicultural learning and instead has focused only on Islamic values ([Ahmad 2007](#)). Different interpretations of Islamic knowledge by different sects has caused severe conflict in contemporary Pakistani society since its independence ([Behuria 2008](#)). In this context, extensive illiteracy about religion not only supports prejudice and intolerance but also obstructs cooperative actions among humans, from interpersonal relationships to negotiations between and within nation-states ([Moore 2007](#)). [Ashraf's \(2018\)](#) call for religious literacy in Pakistani education, by debating the historical construction of Islamized ideologies in political and educational contexts, is the only available text in the literature to date. Religious literacy aims to provide knowledge about the norms of religions, which is very much needed in today's world due to pressure from extremism, migration, and globalization on religions and religious beliefs. Similarly, religious literacy in the Pakistani educational settings will potentially deliver extensive knowledge to students about the religious norms of Islam and about other world religions. Through discussion with teachers from different levels of education in Pakistan, this study aims to understand and address the types of teaching and learning about religion and belief in the Pakistani education system. This study defines religious literacy as knowledge of people's religions and beliefs, the ability to recognize that each religion is diverse, and the practice of accepting different beliefs within a religion as well as between religions.

## 2. Religion, Beliefs, and Extremism in Pakistan

Religion is the fundamental aspect of the identity and politics of Pakistan. Because of its popularity and its role during the partition from British India, Islam was used to define the identity of Pakistan and its citizens, despite the fact that believers of other religions also live in the country. Pakistan was a place of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism before the arrival of Islam in the Indian subcontinent. During

Muslim rule and under British rule after Muslim rule, the relationship between people remained tolerant and cordial (Rahman 2012). Partition changed not only the demographic and religious contours of the region but also the ideology of the people. Muhammad Ali Jinnah's "two-nation theory" is considered to be a symbol of Islam, as well as a common identity to bring together Indian Muslims who share diverse ethnic, geographical, and social divisions (Hussain 2000). A major aim of the two-nation theory was to create common interests for Indian Muslims within the state of Pakistan. After the creation of Pakistan, Jinnah characterized Pakistan as a country of believers from all faiths, which should run according to secular democratic rules. However, the change in Jinnah's view of the Pakistani state proved difficult to implement on a practical level, making it challenging to define it as a country of different faiths.

At present, the issue of religion in Pakistan not only exists between Muslims and non-Muslims but also exists between different sects of each religion. Similar to other parts of the Islamic world, Muslims in Pakistan are divided into two major groups, Sunni and Shia. There are no clear statistics available on the numbers of each group in the country, but it is estimated that 75% are Sunni and 20% are Shia (Human Rights Watch 2014). Within the Sunni Muslims, there are different sects that observe Islam using different ideologies and practices (see Tables 1 and 2).

**Table 1.** Different schools of thought in Sunni and Shia Islam.

Sunni Islam	
Hanafi	Imam Abu Hanifa is the founder of this school of thought. It mostly reflects the views of the jurists of Iraq. Most Pakistani Muslims belong to this school.
Maliki	Malik ibn Anas is the founder of this school of thought, which preferred to be governed by the traditions associated with the Companions of the Holy Prophet.
Shafi'i	Imam Al Shafi is the founder of this school of thought, which puts great importance on the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad.
Hanbali	Imam Ahmad Abn Hanbal is the founder of this school, which is also known as 'Wahabism'.
Shia Islam	
Ja'fari	Imam Ja'far ibn Muhammad al-Sadiq founded this school of thought and established the Ja'fari Jurisprudence (al-Fiqh al-Ja'fari).
Sufism	Sufism is Islamic mysticism, which is considered to be an aspect or dimension of Islam, and can be found in both Sunni and Shia sects.

**Table 2.** Different sects and their associated movement groups within Sunni Muslims in Pakistan.

Sects	Movement/Group
Barelvi	ahlus-sunna, Jamiat Ulema-e-Pakistan, Sunni Ittehad Council, Sunni Tehreek, Tehreek-e-Labaik
Deobandi	Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, Sipah-e-Sahaba, Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam(F), Majlis-e-Ahrar-e-Islam
Wahabism/Salafism	Ahl-i Hadith, Lashkar-e-Taiba
Tablighi Jamat	

The conflict among groups has been present since their creation, as well as at the creation of Pakistan. However, regional and political trends in the 1970s and 1980s triggered this conflict into activism. Cultural revolution in Iran and Afghan Jihad were the two prominent features, along with the regime of Zia-ul-Haq, which shifted secular concepts into the Islamization of Pakistan (Fair 2015). The empowerment of Islamic groups (mainly Deobandi groups and Wahabism) during this period not only resulted in the power of the Taliban in Afghanistan but also resulted in greater extremism within Pakistani societies. Attacks on mosques, Shia Muslims, the Hazara community, and religious gatherings of other Islamic sects are a few of the many examples of violent conflict in Pakistani society

that were linked to religious extremism (see Syed et al. 2016). Moreover, religious minorities in Pakistan have faced tremendous challenges during their journey as Pakistani citizens. In the 1970s and 1980s, the existing problems for minorities were triggered by political trends in Pakistan for the Islamization of the country (Yasmeen 1999). Laws prepared during this period and their methods of application afterwards have turned minority groups into second-class citizens (Salim 2006). Kidnappings and forced conversion of religion in the Hindu community, charges of blasphemy against Christians, targeted killings of Ahmadis (as well as other minority groups), and the desecration of places of worship are some of the many examples of religious intolerance and religious extremism that have occurred in Pakistan. The case of Asia Bibi,<sup>1</sup> Salman Taseer's assassination for his support of Asia Bibi and speaking out against blasphemy laws, the showering of rose petals on Taseer's assassin by lawyers upon his arrival at court,<sup>2</sup> and the assassination of Shahbaz Bhatti<sup>3</sup> by a gunman for his speaking out against blasphemy laws are just a few examples of the numerous incidents that reveal the impact of religious division and religious intolerance in Pakistani society.

There is much academic literature and many reports on religious extremism (Syed et al. 2016; Human Rights Watch 2014; Behuria 2008; Julius 2016) and minorities and their rights (Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies 2014; Rahman 2012; Raina 2014; HRCP 2019). The book edited by Syed et al. (2016) provides a very detailed historical study of Islamic violence and radicalism in Pakistan and of how Deobandi Islam emerged as an increasing influence within the country that posed a threat to other sects within Islam as well as to minority religious groups. Hoodbhoy (2016) explored the emergence of Wahabism in Pakistan led by Saudi Arabia through a global network of charities, preachers, and teachers to legitimize its claim to being the leader of Islam in the Islamic world. Monique's (2013) report, published by the European Parliament, analyzed the role of Wahabi networks in financing and arming rebel groups in different parts of the world, including Pakistan. Human Rights Watch's (2014) report on the killings in the Hazara community based in the province of Balochistan exposed great security threats to the Hazara people from violent Islamic groups funded by private Arab donors to serve as anti-Shia forces. Ahmed (2009) reported that the Parsis community has started to migrate abroad because of increased religious intolerance in their region due to "Talbanization". Rahman's (2004) research on minorities outlined the complicated picture of minorities in Pakistan, who are oppressed not only by the Muslim majority but also by different castes within the Hindu community.

### 3. Education, Religion, and Religious Inclination

Religion in the Pakistani education system is an essential but debatable matter with respect to its overall role in constructing Islamic ideologies and the fact that Islam occupies a central position to construct and develop the education system. Religion became a compulsory subject in schools during the First Education Conference (from 27 November to 1 December 1947) to address the creation of an education system inspired by Islamic ideologies (MOENT 2017). Religious education (Islamic education) is a compulsory subject from grade III education to higher secondary education, which extends up to the graduate level in all general and professional institutions. Article 31 of the Constitution of Pakistan refers to the compulsory teaching of the Quran and Islam in order to ensure that citizens follow an Islamic way of life. The teaching of Islam and the Quran has been implemented through education policies since 2017, when the federal government announced that it is compulsory for all Muslim students to learn the Quran in schools from grade 1 to grade 12. Under the 18th

<sup>1</sup> Asia Bibi is a Christian woman who was accused of committing blasphemy in 2009. For further details, see [https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/1dt-sh/Asia\\_Bibi?curator=alphaideas](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/1dt-sh/Asia_Bibi?curator=alphaideas), last accessed on 7 June 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Lawyers shower rose petals on Salman Taseer's assassin. <https://www.dawn.com/news/596300/murder-condemnable-but-not-for-some>, last accessed on 7 June 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Federal Minister for Minorities Affairs, Shahbaz Bhatti. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/mar/02/pakistan-minister-shot-dead-islamabad>, last accessed on 7 June 2019.

Amendment in the Constitution, control over education was shifted to the legislative and executive authority of the provinces, after 63 years of federal control over education.

The issue of religion in Pakistan's education system has attracted a lot of attention from scholars. The literature on the issue of religion mainly involves the role of religious schools in society and the textbooks used in Pakistani state schools. Religious education has been identified as linked to one of the major reasons for extremism in Pakistan (Fair 2008). Religious schools, which existed in the region before the creation of Pakistan, have played a dominant role in serving society and the state and have divided scholars into two distinctive camps. Religious education in Pakistan has arguably played a positive role in society by providing free education, increasing literacy, and teaching religious principles and human values (Rahman 2004; Ahmad 2004; Bano 2007); however, religious education has been criticized for spreading conservative violent ideologies and training students in a particular ideology that leads to political indoctrination, and schools have even been labeled as incubators of Muslim terrorists (ICG 2002; Singer 2001). The 9/11 attack in the US and the US–Afghan war highlighted the role of religious schools in preparing students for Jihad in Afghanistan, as well as in Pakistan, and encouraging students to implement Sharia law (Fair 2008).

The textbooks used in state schools have received a lot of attention due to their propagandist content. They are blamed for inciting hatred against religious minorities, especially Hindus, producing aggressive nationalism among Muslims, and using Islam to justify the policies of the state. Zia-ul-Haq's regime is considered crucial in the history of Pakistan, during which curriculum textbooks were re-written to shape Pakistani identity in relation to Islamic values. Hoodbhoy and Nayyar's (1985) work is considered to be the first to point out the changes and distortions that entered textbooks during the Islamization of education after General Zia's regime. Later, Saigol (1993) exposed hateful material and nationalistic and militaristic ideologies in language and social studies textbooks. Several other studies confirmed the content bias in textbooks: Hasanain and Nayyar (1997) pointed out the conflicts and violent acts referred to in the educational process, and Nayyar and Salim (2005) analyzed textbooks that claim that "Pakistanis are Muslim alone" (see also Ahmad's (2007) examination of social studies and civics textbooks). These studies confirm that the state of propagandist content in textbooks has remained the same over the years.

Educational institutions have also witnessed radical incidents based on false allegations, hatred, and personal revenge. The lynching case of Mashal Khan is one of many other radical incidents that happened inside a university. A mob led by university students attacked Mashal over false allegations made against him that he had published blasphemous content online. Later investigations showed that it was a planned act of university administrators and students, because Mashal had criticized the university's administration for their poor work and policies. In another incident, Sharon, a young Christian high-school student, was humiliated and punished by his teacher on the first day of school for not wearing a uniform and was killed by his classmate on the second day for drinking water from the same glass as other Muslim students (Ahmed 2017). Very recently, a college student killed his teacher for organizing a mixed reception of new male and female students. Such incidents expose the severity of the manner in which religion is being used to justify inhumane acts, but religion still occupies a central position inside educational parameters. Curriculum texts that provide powerful sources of information for identity constructions and an absence of pedagogical space for an alternative option strengthen the ideological influence on students. However, it becomes more complicated with the inclusion of teachers who come from different educational backgrounds with exceptional prejudices against non-Muslims (Rahman 2012) or even against different sects of Islam. Teachers' beliefs—their subjective judgments about themselves and their environment—may affect their decisions and teaching practices by clarifying context-based knowledge and giving directions through attitudes and behaviors (Brown and Rose 1995). Therefore, even if students are provided with alternative points of view by a teacher, students may not always benefit from them because of their teacher's personal biases.

Identifying the space for religion within the social complexities of the pedagogical space of the classroom, this study aims to explore teachers' reflections on the idea of introducing the concept



of religious literacy into Pakistani classrooms and to examine whether religious literacy can help educational practices to overcome religious intolerance.

#### 4. Details of the Study

This study aims to introduce the concept of religious literacy into the Pakistani education system, which has not been discussed by academics or practiced by academics, with the exception of one study ([Ashraf 2018](#)), which analyzed the Islamic ideologies behind the religious and modern education systems in Pakistan. With the growing number of religious intolerance incidents in Pakistani society as well as in educational institutions, it is necessary to understand the role of religion in education. The literature on religious literacy, mainly from the West, justifies the role of religious literacy in providing better understandings of religion and its role in a particular society ([Noddings 1993, 2008](#); [Moore 2007](#); [Dinham and Shaw 2017](#); [Davie 2015b](#); [Dinham and Francis 2016](#); [Wright 1993](#)). Therefore, ignorance of religion itself and the different beliefs between or within religions may promote misunderstanding that diminishes respect for diversity. This study conceptualizes religious literacy as a philosophical assumption about the nature of knowledge and moral action for individual and social good. Religious literacy could provide individuals with the ability to make informed choices about beliefs that influence their moral understanding, respect, and tolerance for different beliefs; increase understanding; and show responsibility for political and civil engagement. This study has identified two main issues to examine to achieve productive results.

1. Teachers' understanding of the content and purpose of religious education and its link to religious diversity, religious conflict, and religious intolerance in Pakistani society.
2. Teachers' opinions about the concept of "religious literacy" and its projected role in educational settings.

This study is qualitative and selective in nature and took place in Punjab, a very populous province in Pakistan. The school system and curriculum in Punjab is similar to that in other parts of Pakistan. To recruit participants, a mixture of snowball and convenience sampling was used based on pre-established criteria for current teachers who teach subjects related to religious education and who were willing to participate in this study. A total of 25 teachers from different educational institutions (six primary school teachers, five middle and high school teachers, five college teachers, five university teachers, and four religious school teachers) participated in this research. All the participants were current teachers with teaching experience of 3–25 years, aged from 23 to 55 (Table 3). All the interviews were semi-structured and in depth in nature and took place in person between August 2018 and November 2018. Each interview lasted between one and two hours. The participants were contacted for follow-up conversations over the phone to confirm the validity of the data during data transcription and data analysis. All the interviews were conducted in Urdu and were recorded, transcribed, and translated into English for data analysis. All the participants were provided with the latest translated versions of their reflections to check the reliability.

For data analysis, a three-stage systematic data analysis ([Clarke 2005](#)) was conducted using the grounded theory approach to summarize the typology of teachers' responses to religious literacy in educational parameters. Under this approach, data analysis requires a series of coding steps in relation to the collected data. During the first stage, all the transcribed data were divided into open coding after examining the interview transcripts and comparing similarities and differences among the participants' reflections. During the second stage, initial open codes were transformed into meaningful categories of axial coding to identify the properties, dimensions, and relationships. In the last stage, all the axial codes were categorized into different themes through selective coding. In selective coding, all categories and themes were unified around core categories (e.g., purpose and contents of religious education, practice of religious education, practical application of religious education) that were later filled with descriptive details to display research findings. Various codes, such as religious education versus mainstream education, religious beliefs versus religious sects, and religious uniformity versus

religious diversity, were collected to understand the participants' reflections on religious education and the possibility of religious literacy in the Pakistani education system. In total, 42 initial codes were developed in the first stage and were arranged into 10 categories in the second stage, which were finally classified into three major themes.

Ethical considerations have been followed in this study by assuring the privacy of the participants and confidentiality of the research data. Considering the ethics of this research, a consent letter was signed by each participant to confirm their agreement to participate voluntarily. All the participants were informed about the topic and objectives of this study prior to the interview. The participants were further told about the scope of this study, the anonymity of their identity including their affiliation, and that the researcher would use the interview recordings for research purposes only. The meaning of the term "religious literacy" was sent to the participants ahead of the interviews but again explained before and during the interviews.

This study has a few limitations in several aspects. First, the selection of participants was a major limitation that should be reported. All the participants in this study were male and teaching at male campuses of schools. Despite participating voluntarily, the participants were from three major cities in one province with Punjabi ethnicity. Second, the participants were contacted through personal relations, which may have created research bias in the findings of this research, as the sample may not have represented the opinions of the total population. Third, the concept of religious literacy was very new to the participants; therefore, their reflections might not be based on a full understanding of the true spirit of the term and concept.

**Table 3.** Background information on the interviewees.

Participants (Anonymous)	Age	Experience of Teaching (Years)	Religious Affiliation
Ahmad	26	5	Sunni/Barelvi
Usama	32	10	Sunni/Barelvi
Junaid	40	22	Sunni/Deobandi
Asmat	25	4	Sunni Deobandi
Ayaz	42	22	Sunni/Sufism
Ali	35	15	Shia
Dawood	50	32	Sunni/Barelvi
Rizwan	52	35	Sunni/Deobandi
Afaaq	39	20	Sunni/Barelvi
Ishaq	45	25	Sunni/Barelvi
Tariq	42	20	Sunni/Deobandi
Hussain	36	14	Shia
Tahir	40	15	Sunni/Tableegi Jamat
Shahid	37	16	Sunni/Wahabism
Zubair	32	12	Sunni/Wahabism
Noor	39	15	Shia
Saleem	23	2	Sunni/Jamat Islami
Iftikhar	25	4	Sunni/Tableegi Jamat
Imad	34	10	Sunni/Barelvi
Hussain	31	9	Shia
Fakhar	24	2	Sunni/Jamat Islami
Hamid	51	29	Sunni/Tableegi Jamat
Hammad	46	20	Sunni/Jamat Islami
Zakir	27	3	Sunni/Wahabism
Shabbir	29	4	Sunni/Barelvi

## 5. Research Findings

The data from interviews yielded several common themes that arose in the teachers' responses. These themes were as follows: religion is a necessary part of our life, and we must learn it (25 references); religious education is Islamic education (20 references); religious conflicts are not new in this world,

and education should not bring this up in debates (20 references); Pakistan was created for Muslims, so Islam must be taught in schools (19 references); non-Muslims can leave the schools if they think that the content of the curriculum is against them (14 references); Jihad is a fundamental part of Islam even if we do not teach it in schools, it will remain a part of Islamic teachings, and Muslims will learn about it from other sources, such as at home (12 references); religious literacy is not in line with the teachings of Islam (11 references); religious literacy can be accepted if it is given a new name, “Islamic literacy” (8 references); religious literacy is very much needed in our society (6 references); non-Muslims and Shia should understand and learn Sunni Islamic values, which are true and beneficial for all (5 references).

Despite the uniformity of religious textbooks at all levels of education, the personal beliefs of religious education teachers were dissimilar in terms of their sectarian beliefs. Religious education was considered to be the most important part of learning at all levels of education. The participants gave similar importance to religious education as other subjects; yet, religious conflicts were considered to be inappropriate in religious education. However, sectarian differences in personal beliefs and interpretations of religious texts in different ways was a major issue, delivering Islamic values in different ways to students. Diverging views on subjects such as Jihad that have been previously linked to violence were clear in the responses (Hasanain and Nayyar 1997). Nationalism in Pakistani opinion was largely connected to Muslims, who regard believers of other faiths as “religious others”. The concept of religious literacy and its application in schools was rejected by many of the participants due to its earlier connection to the West and its inclusion of other religions.

The importance of the role of religious education in every human’s life was the most commonly agreed upon aspect of the teachers’ responses, as many teachers believe that religion provides students with basic knowledge and guidelines about their beliefs and creates opportunities for them to inquire about and explore issues concerning their religious beliefs. The following themes were extracted from the teachers’ reflections.

## 6. Religious Education in Schools: Purpose and Contents

The key finding about the purpose and content of religious education is that religion is very important to human life, and it should be a part of the school curriculum. Most teachers said that they view religious education as an important subject in school, along with other curriculum subjects. They think that learning about religion in schools enhances students’ personal knowledge about religion and provides them with basic guidelines to live their lives according to their beliefs. As one teacher from a public school said:

I think that learning about religion is as important as learning about science and other subjects. If schools do not provide religious education, parents will send their children to religious schools, or hire a private tutor at home. All students in my class are receiving religious education, some go to mosque or madrassah, and some hire private tutor at home.

Another teacher from a private school said:

Religious education is very important for all, especially for Muslim families. Even though we have Islamic subjects at school, parents still provide extra resources for their children to learn the Quran.

All teachers agreed about the role of religious education and the emphasis Pakistani society puts on the importance of religious education. As all teachers were Muslim, the concept of religion in their discussion was mainly reflective of Islam rather than religious pluralism. They mostly viewed Pakistan as an Islamic country, which should practice Islam. As one teacher said:

Pakistan was created in the name of Allah, [ ... ] for Muslims only [ ... ] and the system in Pakistan should be consistent with Islamic teaching [ ... ].



A total of 18 other teachers' responses were similar to the abovementioned view. They all viewed Pakistan as a Muslim country and Islam as the single religion in Pakistan. Even though they recognized Pakistan as a multicultural society, they considered Islam to be a bond connecting people in the country. These reflections could be understood through previous studies that explored structured identities in Pakistan through curriculum (Durrani and Dunne 2010). The ideology of a Muslim-only country marks the believers of other religions as "religious others". As one teacher said:

Pakistan is a Muslim-majority country, so Islamic education is necessary for Muslim students. If non-Muslims think that it is against their belief, they can leave school and go to their religious schools to learn.

These reflections clearly rejected students of other beliefs in Muslim classrooms. A total of 10 teachers expressed similar views about the rejection of non-Muslims in classrooms. Other teachers viewed this issue moderately, stating that the government, policymakers, and schools should evaluate the situation and find possible solutions. Only three teachers viewed education as a fundamental right of all children in society:

I think we (government, policymakers, society) have not realized the actual situation, different regions have a different population ratio of Muslim and non-Muslim [...] students should receive their right of education despite religious differences.

Alongside the purpose of religious education in schools, the content of religious education in curriculum books was another factor that was discussed by the teachers. The discussions on the content of religious education were primarily based on the solidarity of Islam and Muslims, similar to the discussion about the purpose of religious education. In the multireligious and multicultural society of Pakistan, many teachers mainly focused on the importance of Islamic education for children. "The contents of religious education must follow the Quran and Hadith" was the one statement that the majority of teachers agreed with during the interviews. However, there were clear differences regarding the content and interpretation of Islamic knowledge. Teachers pointed out the biases in religious textbooks that cause conflicts in students' understanding of Islam. For example, Shia teachers mentioned the absence of Shia Islamic literature in textbooks. As one Shia teacher said:

I do not see any content about Shia Islam in the textbooks [...] These books mostly display the ideas of Islam interpreted by Sunni scholars [...] I do not see any unity of Muslims in the absence of our (Shia Islam) interpretations in textbooks, and in the presence of hatred literature in society spread by Sunni Muslims against Shia Muslims.

Even textbooks stay neutral and do not say anything against Shia, but there are many movements by Sunni Muslims that have killed thousands of Shia in Pakistan [...] let me give you an example: One of my students told his classmates that his father told him that Shias are kafir (non-Muslim), and killings of kafir is an obligatory act in Islam.

These views reflect two major facts: the involvement of one's identity in textbooks and the anti-Shia movements in Pakistan. Historically, differences over questions of legitimate power remained the main issue between Shia and Sunni Muslims. These conflicts can be best understood through Zaman's (1998) examination of the radicalization of Shia and Sunni identities, which caused militant sectarian conflict in Pakistan. Even if textbooks do not provide any biased information against Shia, the absence of their identity in textbooks contributes to their perception as a sectarian other.

Aspects of religious education and their relationship to minority religions were another major point for discussion during interviews with teachers. Each participant recognized the diversity of cultures and religions in Pakistan, but they mainly focused on the contexts that were inherent to their beliefs. The word "Jihad" was the most referenced subject among all the participants, but the concept of Jihad was differently perceived by the participants: nine teachers perceived it as an "act of striving

to serve the purposes of God on this earth” (jihad fil sabil Allah); seven teachers perceive it as the “struggle to live a better life”; six teachers perceived it as the “struggle to protect their religion from other religions”; and four teachers perceived it as “protecting the country against its enemies”.

I think that students should learn the important elements of Islam, so that they can live their life according to Islamic law [ ... ] There are a lot of discussions on the topic of Jihad in the curriculum [ ... ] I believe Jihad is one major part of Islam which is necessary for students to learn [ ... ] Jihad is an act of striving to serve the purposes of God on this earth.

There is lot of opposition from (some) national and international people to the contents of Jihad in textbooks due to recent violence. The concept of Jihad is not a problem; the interpretation of Jihad is a problem. Jihad is striving for a better life and to be a better human being.

Jihad is a struggle to protect our religion and religious values from the believers of other religions [ ... ] this struggle could be against the people within Islamic religion who oppose Islamic values.

The true concept of Jihad should be included in textbooks [ ... ] Jihad is an act to save our country from its enemies [ ... ] mainly from other countries but can be against people inside our country.

With regards to minority religions, most teachers rejected the importance of their religious education in schools due to the economic burden and religious issues (11 teachers), the economic burden and the lower number of minority students in schools (7 teachers), and because non-Muslims should learn in separate schools (5 teachers). Only two teachers agreed that schools should have a specific policy for minority religious students so that they can take part in educational activities.

Their religious education in school requires extra teachers, plus it may create conflict between religions because teaching their religion in our school will not be acceptable to teachers and parents.

There are not many students from minority religions in most schools of this city. So separate religious education requires extra teachers, which will create an additional burden on the education budget.

I do not see why we do not understand the difference between two religions and their ways of life. Two different religions cannot be taught in the same school [ ... ] at least not in an Islamic country.

Each region should have clear data about the number of students and their requirements. All students without religious priorities should get equal education and equal opportunity.

## 7. Religious Education and Practical Application

The practical application of religious education inside schools was another crucial question along with the content and purpose of religious education. In line with the mixture of teachers' perceptions about contents and purpose, educational practices and their practical applications inside classrooms revealed a similar set of diverse observations. The practical application of religious education linked directly to policy and teachers' personal beliefs to frame the practices of religious education. Government policy and schools' individual policies are two major contexts that influence educational practices. The relationship between religious education and the structure of policy is fundamental to understanding the educational practices for teaching religious education as well as teaching other subjects with a firm belief in religion. The Islamic mode of citizenship in national policy and the Islamic mode of teaching in schools remain constant; the challenges of violence, religious

conflicts, and religious plurality are excluded. Inside a divided society and within a divided education system, teaching religious education without determining the teachers' sectarian beliefs about religion may create a chaotic learning experience for students.

With regard to religious education in policy, all teachers in this study said that national education policy along with provincial policies should include religious education. Only four teachers stressed the autonomy of schools in constructing their policies for teaching practices including religious education. At present, there is no autonomy for schools to construct their own policy for educational practices.

Policy should be made at a governmental level. Education practices should be stated in the education policy. But schools do not have any power to construct their own policy.

Because of different religious groups, religious education should be part of a nationwide policy and curriculum.

There are no strict guidelines for teachers to adopt educational practices for teaching purposes, such as explaining the different concepts of Islamic principles and knowledge about diversity of religions.

The one thing that is good in school is that we do not divide teachers based on their religious sects, but on their quality. But I think teachers should get training to teach religious education, (but do not say it to other teachers, because most people think teaching religion does not need training).

In line with the ideas of the above teacher, many teachers did not support the idea of hiring specialist teachers to teach religious education. According to most teachers (22), teaching in schools, especially religion, does not require any specific training, because it is very basic knowledge that every Muslim knows:

I do not see any need of training for religious education [ ... ] or any specialist to teach religious education.

There is no need of specialists for teaching religion. I have learnt it throughout my life, and I can teach it, even better than so-called specialists.

## 8. The Idea of Religious Literacy in Pakistani Schools

Religious literacy is addressed by a massive amount of literature in Western countries, especially the United Kingdom (UK) and the US. In order to introduce the idea of religious literacy into Pakistani schools, this study adopted the concept of religious literacy from [Wright \(1993\)](#) and [Dinham and Francis \(2016\)](#), who state that religious literacy is the ability to reflect, communicate, and act in an informed, intelligent, and sensitive manner toward the phenomenon of religion. The importance of understanding religions and religious influences connected to all dimensions of the human experience is critical to this definition of religious literacy. This understanding points to the ability to understand religions through common means such as learning about religious practices across different religions and finding answers to questions of religious conflicts within a religion or between religions ([Ashraf 2018](#)). Differences between religions and/or differences in devotional expressions within religious beliefs are known facts; however, the distinction is often overlooked in public discourse about religion. For example, the debates about the role of men and women in Islam have a variety of religious interpretations, and the concept of Jihad, as discussed above by the participants, has different interpretations. Therefore, it is right for followers of one particular belief to stress the orthodoxy of their religious interpretations, but it is also important to recognize the different religious beliefs and differences in religious interpretations and have respect for their beliefs.

After introducing the concept of religious literacy, teachers were given time to think and reflect until they were ready to answer. Most teachers showed very low levels of agreement in accepting the

concept of religious literacy in schools. A total of 16 teachers openly rejected the concept of religious literacy, five teachers appreciated the concept of religious literacy but rejected it in school teachings, and four teachers appreciated the concept of religious literacy and showed interest in teaching it at school. Personal and social attitudes toward religion were major factors in the disagreement about religious literacy:

Religious literacy is not possible in schools, because it will create more conflicts than solutions. We live in a society that is sensitive to their religion and beliefs. Teaching about something that they do not believe, or that they think are not applicable to their religion, would cause more conflict.

I strongly reject the idea of religious literacy because it is a western concept. People in Islam believe that only the Islamic way of life guarantees success. Thus, learning about the beliefs of other religions or even other sects in Islam is considered impermissible in our religion and society.

People from each sect in Islam (in Pakistan) prefer to dominate their beliefs. Parents may withdraw their children from school if they learn their child is learning about the beliefs of other religions (or other sects of Islam).

Even though religious literacy was appreciated by a few teachers, they believed that social behavior toward religion in Pakistan would not allow the teaching of religious literacy in schools:

I personally like the idea of religious literacy, because it will help students to learn their religion and respect other religions as well. But our society is very sensitive to religion, and one small issue about religion may cause huge violence. So, I do not think many people will favor this idea.

Religious literacy seems good for teaching religion to our students. But our society is hijacked by the hands of a few (religious) people. They (religious people) can label anything good or bad, in favor of or against Islam, a good Muslim or a bad Muslim. So, teachers, most parents and people may appreciate it, but they would not show agreement on it (due to fear of these religious people).

In terms of religion, people believe more in religious personnel, and follow their opinions, than a teacher. So, as a teacher, my duty is to teach students the textbook and help them get good grades. Even I think we need religious peace in our country, but the role of religion and religious intellectuals is more important.

However, there were four teachers who agreed to teach religious literacy to their students:

Religious literacy is a good concept for learning religion. My teaching philosophy and everyday teaching practices encourage students to learn religion and talk sensibly about religion without hurting others' beliefs. I guess I have been teaching religious literacy even without knowing about it.

In my opinion, learning about religion and practicing religion to bring peace to society should be the ultimate goal of every religion. Religious literacy may help students to strengthen their views about religion and religious practices. I wish it could help students (and also people) to understand the real values of religion, and reject the false religious accusations on people.

## 9. Conclusions and Implications

The findings of this study reveal a complex image of teaching religious education in religiously divided societies. Teachers showed extensive commitment to the importance of religious education in

schools, whereas only Sunni Islam was viewed as acceptable to be taught in schools. With regard to the purpose of religious education, teachers viewed religious education as a way to learn the means of life according to their religious beliefs. The behavior of attaching nationalism to religious beliefs was so dominant that most teachers considered Pakistan an Islamic country, which means religious education should include Islamic education only. This echoes previous inquiries on this issue, which displays patterns of nationalism and religion in Pakistan that exclude believers of other religions as citizens of Pakistan (Ashraf 2018). In relation to the contents of religious education, the Quran and Hadith remain the core components of teaching religious education in schools. There was major dissimilarity of opinions over topics such as Jihad that have been observed previously to be causes of violence. The definition of Jihad as perceived by the teachers was divergent in concept and application. The presence of Sunni Islam in textbooks was another major point highlighted by the Shia teachers, who noted that the curriculum only conveys information about one particular sect of Islam. Regarding the application of religious education in schools, the government policy on religious education and a government-structured curriculum was valued by the majority of teachers, wherein schools do not have any particular policy for teaching religious education. Most teachers thought that religious education should be constructed and managed by the government, whereas very few teachers asserted the autonomy of school policy in teaching and learning practices. In terms of the concept of religious literacy and its application in schools, most teachers rejected this idea because of its Western origin, inclusion of other religions, and sensitivity toward religious issues in Pakistani society. Among the few who showed agreement with the concept of religious literacy, sensitivity toward religious issues, the dominant influence of religious scholars and their ideologies, fear of sectarian threat, and conflict over religion and beliefs were the dominant concerns that caused them to think that teaching religious literacy is undesirable in a Pakistani context. However, very few teachers appreciated the idea of religious literacy. Instead, they have been approaching religious education by thinking of it as a social responsibility to teach religion for better understanding among students as well as for the improvement of society.

These findings provide a general assessment of a setting in which learning about religion is a necessary part of education in schools, especially with respect to the relationship of sectarian beliefs and religious education in schools. Although teachers agree with the importance of teaching students about religion and recognize the developmental enthusiasm of their students, the major concerns about the legitimacy of exploring religious topics and giving equal importance to students from other religions as is given to the majority religion remain unclear. In societies such as Pakistan that are divided by religious beliefs, learning about religion through different interpretations, such as in the case of the term Jihad, may cause unclear and confused traditions about religion and belief due to the uncertainty of the concept and its application in reality. Strategies to teach religious education must require evaluations to provide useful approaches for improvement. Creating a respectful religious discussion can be a worrisome prospect for most teachers due to various factors such as sectarian differences among religious beliefs, personal differences among religious beliefs, and limited knowledge about religions. This requires a critical clarification of the issues that are essential for the teaching and learning of religion and for developing a greater understanding of religious context without targeting sectarian others. The appropriate explanation of religious beliefs without teachers' personal endorsements of his/her beliefs, moral conversations to establish safe and inspirational spaces for inspecting controversial issues, internal dialogues among students to learn about the religious beliefs of all students, and respect for individuals and their beliefs are a few promising methods for teachers to consider using to teach religious education in a peaceful manner. Teachers and their personal beliefs must be considered prior to teaching about religion, and content should reflect the extent of the real-world religious landscape, in which believers from all religious backgrounds find confidence and learn to respect different religions and beliefs. Teaching religious education requires much more training for teachers with the aim of providing students with meaningful knowledge about religions to create harmony.

In relation to the concept of religious education and its application in an educational setting, the academic study of religion should be explored from internal and external sides of the religious space.

Religious education without considering the diversity of society in terms of religion and culture may pose challenges for future generations due to its perpetuation of singularity and its non-compatibility with human rights. Religious literacy that aims at teaching religions comprehensively, and as an essential tool for national cohesion and social responsibility, may prepare students with rich knowledge about religion and its role in everyday activities for concrete tasks of social engagement and for building a religiously literate society that understands similarities and differences in religions and beliefs. Otherwise, learning about one particular belief by rejecting all beliefs of other people will keep society away from shared understandings about religious beliefs and human rights. Even though the majority of teachers rejected the idea of employing religious literacy in schools, continuous efforts with respect to the importance and benefits of religious literacy will yield productive outcomes. The basic idea of focusing on national cohesion and personal spirituality by ignoring sectarian differences, extremism, and sectarian violence may reflect individual understandings together with concerns about religions as forces for separation, coercion, and violence.

**Funding:** This research was funded by Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities in China (No. 531118010283).

**Acknowledgments:** I am thankful to all those who voluntarily participated in this research.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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