Towards comprehensive religious education (a trial for new research ways within the frame of liberalism and multiculturalism concepts)

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Abstract

Humanism is a concrete result of the battle which the Western civilization made with Catholic Church. Church and God was tried to be weakened since they are regarded as tools of oppression which tries to estrange people to the values that turns a human being into a person, and these tools were tried to be replaced with human, directly. This change in ontological paradigm paved a way to enlightenment, also by affecting information, and enlightenment paved a way to fast technological developments. In this study, in order to understand the concept of humanism, which we consider as the condition for understanding today and future and creation of new values upon this understanding, and in order to present the connection of humanism to our root values, I will try to think out loud within the context of the effects of the relation between the concepts of liberalism, pluralism and multiculturalism, which I think have a close relation to humanism, on religious education perceptions. In a world in which cultures, religions and races spread freely and which is smaller than before what kind of a multicultural society model can we build up? How ready are we to practice these models in historical and intellectual senses? I will try to discuss the answers to these questions.

Keywords: Religious Education; Liberalism; Multiculturalism; Comprehensive Religious Education.

1. Introduction

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In fact, our basic assumptions about life are effective on our approaches concerning religious education. Beyond our statements as of our traditions and actions, no matter whether we have a pluralist or monist approach, or as the people who assimilate do we prefer ashoura (a mosaic) or soup (a mixture)? As the people who represent majority and as intellectuals, do we want the minorities to be protected in an uncontrolled changing process? Or does the imposition of the hegemonic (sexual, cultural, religious or denominational) lie behind our point of views and evaluations?

When we talk about teaching religions, do we plan to raise the soldiers of the world that we dream to build or do we expect the religion to contribute to our world? These questions also point out the main problems that have to be overcome in the field of religious education. By pointing out the relations between these problem fields which seem irrelevant to each other, I will try to make some determinations about the future of religious education.

2. Main Text

2.1. Shell Change from Traditional Values into Universal Values

The traditional religious education of Islam has been effective on religious education activities in Turkey throughout centuries. In religious education activities, which are carried out at various levels, teacher-centered and content-centered applications have emerged. The first step of religious education consist of teaching Quran with Arabic alphabet, memorizing prayers and short suras which are necessary for worship, giving necessary religious information to worship and a brief summary of the life of Prophet Muhammad. Among those who developed Koran reading skills, the talented ones were taken an education including memorizing the Koran to become a hafiz, and the ones who completed this education successfully and had the opportunity and the interest were directed to madrasahs which had the characteristics of higher religious education institutions. Meanwhile, vocational training in the form of master-apprentice training was continued with on-the-job training and moral and values education at work.

Ottoman Empire’s efforts to follow the developments in the west, starting from the 18th century, could not make a progress in the field of education. While institutional structures were changing, traditional understanding styles and content continued to be decisive on human training model. Especially in the field of religious education, presentation of a religious education, which was limited by catechisms in new educational institutions, was followed. The main purpose of this traditional education is to provide the basic information which Muslim people need in their daily life.

Despite some structural changes, religious education could not follow either the social or the scientific developments until 2000s. This change and development in the sense of religion is important for its being the first. Because the teachings in the religious education taken from theology were made suitable for education and so theology, which could not follow the developments, was not able to make a contribution to the development of religious education. Second one is the developments in the field of education. Third one is new understandings and applications in religious education. The individuals from different faiths and cultures has become closer and interacted with each other more than before and this interaction has caused new models such as phenomenological, intercultural, interdenominational and multicultural understandings to be introduced in addition to sect-centered understanding.

In Turkey, there is a discussion which has increasingly been talked over starting from 1980s about what should be the model to be adopted in religious education. Since 2000, Turkey has quickly subjected the model to change on which religious culture and moral knowledge course, which is one of the compulsory courses in schools, is based in a manner that it can appeal to differences. In Turkey, it is stated that compulsory religious education courses in primary and secondary education are based on a model which is interfaith and supra-sectional.

Liberal viewpoint is observed clearly in all these aspects. Liberal viewpoint requires supporting the individual’s personal development and enabling him to adapt to the society in
which he lives by minimizing institutional oppression in religious education (churches or similar religious hierarchical structures). In a sense, liberalism means that on secularism, individualism and freedom principles should be activated on educational and religious educational understandings.

2.2. Towards Comprehensive Religious Education

The planning of the courses in the field of religious education (in particular I mean religious culture and moral knowledge classes) will start with setting purposes. Especially, Islamic educators argue that the most important determinant on religious education activities is the basic Islamic sources and other educational processes cannot be organized independently of these sources. This approach persists that purposes of religious education should be organized with reference to content of traditional Islamic education. Indeed, when curriculum of the religious education and religious culture and moral knowledge courses of primary and secondary education of early republic period is analyzed, you can clearly see that they were developed with reference to content of Islamic Catechism.

When we speak upon the concept of educational purposes, in reality we're talking about our intentions. There is no difference between saying: "Education's purpose is to educate good citizens" or "Education’s intention is to educate good citizens". At the same time, as well as the intentions, purposes are closely attached with values. Similarly, there is a strong relationship between the purpose of education and our belief in the functions that the education needs to undertake. Therefore, goal setting process for a subject that we will teach is not independent from our value judgment. As well as this value judgment affects our goal setting process, more specifically, it affects our education definition, arrangements of curriculum in other aspects, course flow charts which will be followed for each subject and our applications in the education process.

That’s why, educational purposes are arranged to help us in response to the question "Why?" (Why do I teach this subject, these concepts and skills?). Also these purposes help us to response to the question “How” (How will I teach this issue, concept, facts and skills?). Because, the response of the questions of how will we teach this issue and which approach will we use, directs us to the educational purposes that we expect to reach. Then the base of the education aims comes into question which depends on a good superstructure (subjects, expansions, working plans and content). When we take time to think about the purposes of education, content is transformed into a secondary material for us. We give more priority to personal development of the individual and his freedom and minimize all the institutional and social oppressions over the individual. We also give priority the skills which are necessary in the solution of the problems arising when the individual encounters with differences. This liberalizes the religious education process and makes it multicultural.

Moving from the purposes and centralizing the individual do not mean giving up the content completely. As I underlined above, a religious education acting upon purposes both centralize the individual and it is in relation with the content in order to provide the individuals to adapt to the society in which they live. Here the key feature making liberal religious education different from traditional education is the replacement of the central content with the individual that is in the environment. In liberal religious education, while the individual takes part in central, content is carried to the environment. Therefore, the content will become usable and beneficial as long as it becomes meaningful for the development and freedom of the individual.

The most important part of the reasons that are put forward by the ones defending that religious education should be included in curriculum is not grounded on educational reasons. The matter is generally grounded on religious, historical, ethical and cultural reasons. In this grounding there are some points which are ignored such as the reason that we determined in order to include an area in curriculum, adopted teaching approach and also content of the area is determinant. The key feature of these groundings which are made with religious, historical, ethical and cultural reasons is that educated generations convey a standard content to oncoming generations. This
provides us a significant framework related to the content and to the method. Educated generations want such individuals who read Koran, know some Arabic prayers and short suras from Koran off by heart, have enough skills and information to help them worship in their daily life, know Prophet’s life generally. On behalf of the moral and values, a process proposing to respect for elders, show love to minors, convey values based on social utility such as social cooperation, sharing and togetherness is expected. This content comes with the methods which are teacher and content centered, giving particular importance to verbal transfer and memorization. We mention such a procedural process that there is no asking and questioning; questions are answered according to the content by the way of rationalization.

The expressions used in unit titles and explanations of religious culture and moral knowledge course books clearly refer to the teaching approaches that will be used. The learning domains such as faith, worship, moral and values, life of Prophet Mohammed emerge as the product of traditional religious education. Last words of the attainments such as recites, tells the meaning, states, understands the importance, gives examples, knows, explains present a procedural framework aiming at filling the minds of the individuals accepted as tabula rasa according to adults. That’s why, teachers give priority to memorize prayers and suras and have a tendency to use old methods which even lost traces from educational processes such as making students write notes, verbal presentations and readings from the book. Even, it is encountered such teacher profiles giving priority to memorize prayer and sura as the basic requirement for the evaluation and evaluate the student’s success in religious education according to the success in memorizing the prayer and suras.

When the religious education applicators’ statements and applications grounding religious education are analyzed, a silent hypothesis defending that religious education should be Islam-centered emerges. An important part of the claims suggests that the result of the religious education requires directing the individuals towards Islamic way of life and faith either implicitly or explicitly. This hypothesis identifies the school tasks in religious education area with the task of the mosques in religious education area. However, on the basis of the groundings above, when we defend that the religious education should be given in schools, we need to be prepared to response the question: “Why don’t the mosques fulfill this responsibility?”

There are some people stating that an Islam-centered religious education as an education area in schools will help individuals to make sense of themselves and their environment. It is thought that they will not have much difficulty since such a religious education contributes them with the help of cognitive learning. Also there are ones who think that the methods of such a religious education can be improved within the process. Including Islam, which makes a big contribution to society’s dominant culture, all religions claim themselves as the only representative of the reality by force of their nature. With these claims, religions can make contribution to the development of critical thinking skills and increase of alternatives by offering different viewpoints to help individuals make sense of their life and environment. There are answers given to vital questions of human by religions as well as science and philosophy.

The ones who defend that religious education should be given in the schools made this association with the educational reasons and this association has critical aspects when it is looked from different perspectives. As well as there are ones accepting that this area should be taught as a course at schools, there are ones objecting to it, which shows the difference of this area from other areas. This opposing is faith-based, just like it is in belief. On the basis of this acceptance, there might be some people defending that various philosophical understandings which give priority to human and even divinize the human such as atheism, political ideologies, sorcery and magic should be taught at schools as a course.

Another critical aspect emerges at the point of the decisiveness of the religious education as a shaper of the society. When we approach to the subject in terms of Turkish society, there is an Islamic way of religious understanding penetrating each cells of the culture. However, this way of understanding is not the only way of explaining the religion. Meeting with different religions as a result of both meeting of different socio-cultural differences and cultural differences factually introduces pluralist religious understandings. If the ones making this criticism can mention more than one alternative for the reality’s understanding of religion, they defend that these alternatives
need to be included in curriculum. This criticism should be thought and discussed upon. Don’t the religious beliefs of the majority of the society deserve to take part in the teaching system more than other belief systems do? Of course if the education takes the responsibility of transmission of the cultural heritage by enriching it, an Islamic religious-based educational arrangement should be acknowledged. On the other hand, this effect doesn’t justify ignoring the other belief systems and religions. When you legitimize a religious education process that is under the government’s control, you cannot ignore the religious and cultural development of a great community to whom the government has to bring services. However, such a process shouldn’t give the government the right to build its own understanding of religion and form the differences in this building process.

3. Conclusion

In a word, religious education is related to the life that our children are knowledgeable with, to the depth of the life that our children learn superficially, to the whole life our children learned in pieces in different disciplines. In fact, religious education is a speech between adults and the growing generations on a simple question: “What is the life like?” Life is a dialogue between the experienced and inexperienced ones in life. This dialogue will make them reach to the things that they have just found or to the things that they can find together.”

The most important issue in the statements that I quoted above is teachers’ accepting the children’s own experiences as a starting point of religious education. Traditional religious symbols are expressed with the help of the individuals’ own language and symbols of that culture. Starting from the introduction of religious literature into human world of meaning, religious terms have divine qualifications and they are rebuilt on the life experience of its own and of society that it makes sense of life together. If considered in this way, in a sense, religious concepts emerge as a result of human thought. To include the growing generations in this thinking process is the responsibility of religious education. By this way we include the individuals in building of the religious understanding that they live in. By this means, they can experience the religion in which they include by making sense of it. Such a building process requires interpretation skill and for an interpretation skill a content is needed allowing them to make comparisons.

When the individuals compare the values they have with the others, their own values are under threat of “exhaustion” and “extinction”; maybe this is the most important issue that we encounter. In fact the society can deactivate the non-functional values in life automatically. If we evaluate the issue with regards to the values such as “faith of God” which couldn’t communicate with the individual, an understanding of worship which is ineffective on the behaviors, justice, compassion, responsibility, love, cleanliness, respect the rights of other people and sharing which exists literally but we cannot see their traces in social life. We can clearly see that background of these values’ becoming invisible in the social life is that the individuals are not given an opportunity to build their own values.

While pedagogy encourages the individuals to ask, seek and find in all subject areas, it cannot be thought that religious education doesn’t pursue the same goal. Religious education, as well as in all areas of education, should direct individuals to discover the religious aspects of human experience. In this sense, Islamic tradition is the student's laboratory in this discovery process. Religious education must present a framework to the growing generations that they need on the basis of Islamic tradition. When children defend the explanations of life based on Islamic explanations; they will find an opportunity to see that these interpretations are the results of the experiences this life has provided to us.

Here, we are faced with an important proposition which comes into the minds of most of us. A student’s having a belief which will guide him throughout his life is a situation which is both necessary and desired by religious tradition. Here, two separate opinions may arise. First, if the word “faith” is used as a synonym of the concepts “life itself or philosophy of life”, rather than providing a child one single religious situation. We see it as a necessity to give the religious education an opportunity to provide a child to meet with the largest possible chain of thoughts and
to give him opportunity to discover. If the word “faith” is equalized with a faith which only belongs to Islam in a specific sense, it means that we expose the child to only one world view and confine him to the necessities of that faith. Such an instruction is not a desirable situation in terms of a liberal education understanding. On the other hand, though education is a concept observed on the child’s behaviors related to his whole development, education’s expressing an opinion in favor of a belief, emphasizing the superiorities of having that belief is considered as putting barriers to individual development.

The mission of religious education is not only to help the child to make his own way and look from different perspectives to the life about religious understanding as a form of explaining the life, but also to prepare a ground which provides him to benefit from the tradition if the individual assumes a religious attitude. When we approach to the subject in terms of teacher attitudes and approaches in the schools, it is not possible to observe that this responsibility is taken into consideration. However, the situation of religious education here looks like a shop owner who has goods for sale in his shop window. But while this shop owner allows his customer to view, evaluate and even “try” the goods in the windows, will he avoid the attitudes and behaviors obliging them to buy or will he be in a position directing and obliging them to buy? Even if religious education curriculum development doesn’t appreciate such an attitude, teachers can take the role of shop owner who is obliged to sell his products. The mission of teacher to contribute to improve students’ skills providing them to buy the goods they need cannot be ignored.

When we consider the religion as a study and application field of pedagogy, we need to talk about a framework “which can be thought over and provide awareness”. When we start to think over this framework, it will be inevitable for us to encounter with the searching for the truths among differences. In such a process, I think that the purposes of religious education as an application area of pedagogy should be discussed and improved on the basis of the points below:

1. As a method of describing personal experiences, the purpose of religious education is to develop an understanding on the nature of religion itself.
2. The purpose of religious education is to form a basis providing students to think about the religion and develop an understanding. Just as mathematics and history teachings help students to think mathematically and historically, religious education should improve students’ religious thinking skills.

As long as the religious education achieve these targets, it will become liberal by making a major contribution to the individuals’ development and it will gain a multicultural qualification by embracing the differences.