

# **Explanation and Evaluation of Rational Approach to Religious Education: (Capabilities and Shortages)**

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## **Abstract**

**The rational approach is one of the main approaches to religious education. This approach has its critics and supporters. Critics of this approach believe that the rational approach – according to characteristics of rationality, cannot fit to the process that is religious; because, there is sharp distinction and conflict between religion and rationality. Therefore, based on critics' views we could not speak about rational approach to religious education.**

**However, supporters of rational approach to religious education believe that there is close relation between rationality and religion; because religion is a rational-based activity. The study of critics and supporters' view about rational approach to religious education is set forth.**

**Key Words: Religious education, Rational approach, Rationality, Religion, Critique.**

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## Introduction

There is no agreement among scientists and holders of expert opinions about the educational religious approaches. Some, such as a Gager suggest use of habitude and some others such as Hirst consider habitual methods inculcation and reject it. (Sha'bani Varki, 2002, p. 268). The contradiction that exists between rationalism and habitude is an important subject that has grabbed the attention of instructors. Also some such as Peters, consider habitude rather the only replacement at the age when the learner is not yet able to understand reasoning (Peters, 1999, p. 27). In general it can be said that most instructors consider use of rationalism and reasoning an essential matter at the age when the learner is able to understand the issues. The rational approach can be considered due to three perspectives:

First, due to the fact that many philosophers, such as the Western education philosophers like Hirst, believe religious education to be inculcation and the purpose of education to be the expansion of strength of rationality (Zibaa-Kalaam, 2000, p. 82).

Second, due to the fact that taking advantage of rational approach is an important tool for answering doubts that are raised about religious education. For example, Peter Gardner believes that religious education is in contradiction with open-mindedness (Gardner, 1993, p. 158).

Third, due to the fact that, Quran emphasizes the importance of thinking and rationality in the guidance of human being and questions the rational dimension of the human being's existence.

Considering the mentioned reasons, we can focus on the issue of: what rational approach means when facing religious education, what its abilities and efficiencies are in fulfilling the religious education goals, and what shortages this approach faces in achieving religious education goals. The purpose of this paper is answering these questions.

## 1. Rationality and Education

Discussion about the causes for behaviors and beliefs in its common form, and religious behavior and belief in specialized form has a long record. What influences our religious behavior and how valuable behaviors can be supported and reinforced have different answers. This topic has been discussed a lot in the philosophy of morality. Socrates believed that the foundation of any wickedness is ignorance. He tried to lead the person toward knowledge (Naghibzadeh, p. 44). Plato, just like his teacher, emphasized knowledge.

Aristotle stresses on the learner's education and preparation for accepting reasoning and logic. By highlighting rationalism in education, he indicates, "what distinguishes human being from animals is wisdom and rational and due to the fact that perfection of any thing is in appearance of its true nature, and it is known that the true nature of human being is its wisdom, therefore human being's wisdom is the person's superior guide" (Kardan, 1993, p. 179).

In his book, "How we think", Dewey mentions that exact and logical thinking – which he calls reflective – always beings with the experience of specific circumstances.

Peters is among the contemporary analytical philosophers. He maintains a special position for education and rejects inculcation (Carr, 1998, p. 51).

In the Islam's viewpoint also, human being reached the depth of matters by the ability driven from rational and thought. In the Islamic thought, contemplating and thinking through the divine verses is considered a goal.

## 2. Religious education approaches

In general, religiosity is based on three approaches: Habitude, Rationality, and Intuition, each of which is considered for a specific purpose and special goals. Religious education also, because of its goals is founded on one of these foundations. We will briefly investigate the characteristics of each of them.

## **2.1 The approach based on habitude**

In this approach habitude-teaching plays an important role in structuring the religious behaviors. In the religious attitude that is based on habitude, things revolve around affection and not rational or religious experiences. This type of religiosity is typical of the laymen and therefore not safe from the harm of superstitions. Among the other characteristics of this type of religiosity is its being causal. What this means is that the individual has not accepted it through reason; rather, it has been due to causes and conditions that he has been pulled toward such religiosity. This type of religiosity is also called ceremonial and of formality. This is such that ceremonies and formalities have become habit and there is no thinking involved in it. In this type of religiosity characters become legends and absolute imitation is clearly observable and the volume of practices becomes the standard for the high or low density of belief (Soroush, 1381/2002, p. 146).

## **2.1 The approach based on knowledge (rationality)**

In this approach there is great emphasis on rationality and rational knowledge. Religion and religiosity are assessed by rationality to the point that religion should fit in the context of rationality and has to pass through its filter.

In the knowledge-oriented religiosity or philosophical understanding of religion, the jewel of “faith” is of cognition type (Attaran, 2001, p. 155). Emotions and excitement is pale in color and what is most important is understanding. In this type of religiosity therefore, the talk is about secrets. This of course is not secret in the meaning of legend, but rather, a puzzle and rational difficulty with which struggling is the exactly equal to a rational living (Soroush, 2002, p. 26).

## **2.1 The intuitive approach**

Some believe that the essence of religiosity – meaning the experience of the holy matter – is not a theoretical and rational issue that is changeable to theoretical choices and a set of imaginations. These believe religiosity to be the product of an existent mythical conduct which cannot be changed to a rational path. Plantinga believes that religious experience is the important source of knowledge and this knowledge is the very same feeling that we have inside about the holy matter (God). The inside intuitive belief is not a demonstrated matter (Monsma, 2003, p. 33). These people believe that besides feeling and rational, intuition is another tool for understanding in human-being. Intuition is the direct and without mediation way of understanding truth and knowledge in the heart. If a human being is able to purify his conscience from sins, he will be competent to realize some of the truth in his heart.

## **3. Capabilities of the rational-based religious education**

The supporters of utilizing the rational approach in religious education go after the capabilities and effective applications of the rational approach in religious education and try to defend this approach by emphasizing its applicability and effectiveness. This is for the purpose of criticizing the habitual or intuitive approach in Religious education and stating their shortages for fulfillment of correct religious education. In the opinion of the mentioned supporters, rational approach to religious education is in possession of capabilities, applicabilities, and genuineness which include the following:

### **3.1 The rational approach prevents inculcation to enter the religious education process**

The rational approach, which means emphasis on the substantiated and rational aspects of accepting information and

concepts through out the religious education process, logically avoids the religious education exposure to inoculation. As a result, it keeps religious education on the correct path, which is the mentioned rationality and substantiation (Oser, 2001, p. 236).

### **3.2 The religious education process becoming critical**

In the education process, although it is the instructor who should encourage the students for thinking and criticizing, the instructor himself should have the strength for analysis and criticism, especially in the field of subjects which should be taught in the area of religious education. Whenever the topic of religious beliefs education comes forward, immediately the word indoctrination comes to mind which results in a “closed mind”. (Ellis, 1995, p. 35). Of course some intellectuals point to the impossibility of criticizing in religious education and believe that the being religious of a process is fundamentally incompatible with its being critical or rational. This is because religion has no compatibility with the criticizing spirit and is more judgmental and needs to be accepted. These intellectuals believe religious education to be paradoxical to a process called education which has a criticizing aspect (Hudson, 1973, p. 169).

### **3.3 The rational approach prevents exclusivism**

To be direct to the point, exclusivism is one of the damaging grounds in the field of religious education. In exclusivism, the instructor or the learner assumes that what he has at hand is the absolute truth and that whatever is other than his thought and religion is absolutely void. Exclusivism makes religious education vulnerable and closes the doors for dialog between the supporters of different religions (Bagheir, 1380, p. 57). By relying on the rational approach in religious education process, it is possible to avoid exclusivism. Amongst the benefits of moving-away from exclusivism and choosing the rational approach in religious education are the possibilities to set-up the ground to moderate and suitably make logical facilities in the learners such that the

opportunity to interact, have dialog, and communicate between them, especially individuals with different cultural and religious backgrounds becomes possible. The rationality in mind is the same as critical rationality during which learners first become familiar with various religious beliefs without taking sides instead of the absolute acceptance of any special religion; then based on witness and logical reason accept a special religion while having respect and indulgence for other religions (Barnes, 2001, p. 445).

### **3.4 The rational flourishing of the learner**

The real place of a human-being is in the hands of his thinking and intellect. Most Islamic philosophers believe that the purpose of human-being creation is the education and flourishing of his rational (Ziba-kalaam, p. 160). The human rationality is considered his scale for the correct and the incorrect and good and bad. The efforts in rationality education should move to control the deviated elements of this scale. In such circumstance the product, meaning guidance, will flourish. The human rationality is a guide itself.

### **3.5 Denying the tendency for mythology in religious education**

One of the main characteristics of the religious education process is founding the models. This characteristic is a lot more in religious education compared to other educational processes. The stated models in religious education also are religious ones that usually go along with sacredness. To present models and great religious characters as myths causes unreal modeling after them (Sa'eedee, 2001, p. 103). Of course one of the harms to religious education can be found in the mentioned field, which unfortunately causes denial of reasonable modeling.

## **4 Shortages in the rational-based religious education**

Although there are points of strength in the rational approach in religious education, this approach has shortages in fulfilling religious education that have been considered by the critics of such approach. We refer to some of these points in brief as follows:

### **4.1 The rational approach cannot be a real motivator of religious activity**

Although rational approach can improve the aspect of religious understanding and stabilize it (the understanding of descriptive religious matters such understanding God, human, resurrection, etc.), it will not be able to compel the students on its own to do the religious practices and duties and provides no necessity for the religious musts (religious musts such as commands and duties).

### **4.2 The rational approach cannot be the start point for religious education**

The rational approach strengthens the religious beliefs and provides enough rational reasons for accepting religious commands. For this reason, some believe that the rational approach nourished good supporters for religion but not persons who are obliged to act based upon the learnings, commands, and musts. But the point here is that starting religious education especially in younger ages is not possible through rational and reasoning. The instructors should provide the religious education ground first by setting up a suitable environment and offering educational models and developing fine habits. They should then focus on rational discussions and logic to strengthen the belief foundations and removing doubts and avoiding shallow religiosity among students (Sa'eedee, 2003, p. 105).



### **4.3 Incompatibility between the rational approach goal and the religious education goal**

The goal of rational approach to religious education is that what the learner understands from religion and is mentally satisfied by should be according to the mental plate of capacity and rational reasoning. In this approach, religion is surfacing mostly in the rational aspect. Only the rational aspects of religion and religiosity are manifested in the religious education process and the obedient aspects of religion (the aspects that apparently cannot be reasoned for by the rational and logical approach) are paid less attention to. It is clear that nothing other than that can be expected from the rational approach.

Of course we face another type of rationality beside the logical-philosophical rationalism in the religious education which is pragmatic rationality. From the point of view of religious education, this type of rationality faces several obstacles. Pragmatic rationality is rationality based on critical thinking in which independence is principle. Religious education from the point of view of this rationality is dynamic when it is fully based on criticism, revision, and selection. This matter is not compatible with the aim of religious education that requires a set of regulations and religious beliefs – of course without criticism and revision (Feinberg, 2003, p. 92).

At the end, this principle point can be mentioned that the rational approach to religious education has both a set of characteristics which makes using it unavoidable as well as influences and consequences that creates problems and challenges for religious education.

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