The Need to Reformulate Education Policy for Purposes of Addressing Religious Extremism, with Reference to Three South African Policy Documents

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

K E Y W O R D S

A B S T R A C T

Religious and other forms of extremism are rife in modern societies. This paper explores some of the reasons why some young people do not follow the "normal" pathways towards becoming citizens who can contribute to the well-being of society and to peaceful coexistence. The answer to this problem seems to lie in the nature of their education as well as in other factors and conditions in their environments. Radicalisation through education gone awry can drive a young person towards extremism. Young people therefore have to be educated in ways that would prevent them from becoming radicalised. This insight should also be reflected in education policy documents. Three South African education policy documents are used to demonstrate how policy documents could be revised to include strategies for the prevention of (religious, cultural and political) extremism, namely the *Manifesto on Values, Education and Democracy* (2001), the *National Policy on Religion Education* (2003) and the *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements* (2011).

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Introduction and Problem Statement

Educators all over the world are constantly being reminded of religious behaviour and deeds that could be regarded, in terms of the norm systems of their own societies and communities, as socially delinquent, aberrant, negative and hence unacceptable. The agents of such actions have been variously labelled, among others as "perpetrators of criminal anti-human and -social behaviour," as people who inflict pain and discomfort on "innocent victims," and even as "(religious, cultural or political) extremists, fanatics, fundamentalists, zealots, bigots, radicals, terrorists, assassins or obsessives". The problem of religious extremism has reached disconcerting proportions; deviant religious behaviour has in the recent past been displayed by adherents to most religions, cultural and political groupings around the world (as chronicled by, for instance, Henderson, 2013; also cf. Nussbaum, 2012: 8, 50, 51, 214, 225).

In recent years, we have been witnessing incidences of religious (and cultural) intolerance on an international level (the 9 September 2001 World Trade Centre incident [Wright, 2009: 9]; the Gaza Strip incident after the opening of the United States' embassy in Jerusalem on 14 May 2018 in which 110 Palestinians lost their lives), on a national level (the invasions from the north by Islamic fundamentalists in Nigeria and Mali; the conflicts between religious groups in countries across the world), and also on a personal and individual level. The resolution of the first two forms of religious (and cultural) intolerance depends more on the success of international and national diplomacy since they seem to be more of a political nature than a personal one. Examples of religious intolerance can be multiplied by referring to the positions of the Roma, Muslims and other religious minorities in Europe, and to the treatment of Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and Taoist minority groups in the Orient and in Africa. The ubiquitous nature of the problem of religious and other forms of intolerance forces us to investigate the problem and to cast around for a workable solution. Our main concern here is with how we could contribute to the eradication of religious and other forms of intolerance among individuals, i.e. on the school grounds, in shopping centres, in our diverse communities and in the general interaction among people.

In this article, the focus is on religious extremism on a personal and individual level. It could be argued, as South African constitutional law expert De Vos (2011) has done, that the issue of religious and cultural intolerance among individuals and religious groups should be resolved through the courts which are the protectors of the constitutional rights of citizens (also see Wright, 2009: 54-59; Schreiner, 2005: 6). Human rights conventions and international

education standards are deemed sufficient to guide national policy on religion in public places such as state schools. De Vos' stance is supported by official political statements such as the International Commission's *Education for the Twenty-first Century: Learning, the Treasure Within* (Delors, 1996). It is unfortunately also a fact that not all the religious intolerance and extremism that people demonstrate and experience can be effectively resolved through the courts or international commissions. It will be argued below that religious intolerance and extremism has to be dealt with on a personal and individual level, and that education is the key to this process.

As educationists have to ask ourselves what the connections between (religious) intolerance and education might be. What is it that drives some youngsters to (religious) extremism (Nissen, 2014)? Does (religious) extremism manifest in a person because something has gone awry with his or her education? It is important to ask these questions despite the fact that experts on extremism seldom focus on possible shortcomings in the education of radicalised young people (cf. RSG, 9 April 2015). The South African Muslim Judicial Council and other parties recently correctly drew attention to this lacuna by raising concern about the education of the young people recruited to become members of extremist groups (Modjadji, 2015, 3; De Wee, 2015, 9). The Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia also recently insisted that "the ideas of extremism, radicalism and terrorism do not belong to Islam in any way" (Armstrong, 2014: 24). Islamic scholar Hussain Solomon said after the bombing of a restaurant in Cape Town, South Africa, that as a Muslim, he was appalled that people would use Islam, "a religion of peace, and morph it into something ugly" (Potgieter, 2014: 32).

Research Method

An analysis was done of available narratives of and regarding young people who had opted to become radical in their religious outlook and behaviour. Such narratives, as recorded by various authors but which space constraints prevent from retelling here, offer information and messages about the worlds of the storytellers (Nussbaum, 2011: ix). A narrative creates links with the cultural and religious experiences that lie behind them: what is told situates the storyteller in the (political, religious, cultural) frame of what is to be remembered and what is to be forgotten (Van Liere, 2014: 159-160). According to Nissen (2014), a close look at the individuals working towards extremist ideals reveals a "prismatic reality".

Constructivist-interpretivism was subsequently employed to formulate theory based on what could be learned from the stories. The next section contains the conceptual and theoretical

framework that emerged. That is followed by a discussion of the forces and influences that seem to play roles in the upbringing (education) of (young) religious extremists. The article concludes with a discussion of how education could be employed for the purpose of pre-empting the rise and growth of religious extremism among the young as well as a suggestion about how education policy documents could be revisited for the purpose of pre-emption and eradication of religious extremism. The situation in South Africa is used as a case in point.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

(Religious) Extremism

An effective way of defining "extremist behaviour" is to do so in terms of boundary-setting. Education is about the setting of boundaries for children through the words and examples of their educators. The boundaries set by educators are demarcated in terms of attitudes, behaviour and actions that would be regarded as contributing to the general well-being of the self, other people, and of society in general, in other words, to a positive *modus vivendi* (a respectful, friendly and peaceful co-existence) (Nussbaum, 2012: 90, 174). "Normal" or "acceptable" attitudes and behaviour fall within the ambit of such socially sanctioned boundaries (usually embodied in the constitution of the nation, in some or other formulation of the "Golden Rule" such as Rousseau's maxim or Kant's categorical imperative, and / or in a set of religious and ethical guidelines as offered by the Bible or the Quran, to mention only two of the holy books). Behaviour that falls outside of these boundaries could be regarded as per definition anti-social by the religious group concerned.

According to Wahl (2004: 10), extremism can also be described as behaviour that is anti-modern (for instance, a regressive and anarchic reaction against current societal and state arrangements) and intolerant (in the sense of regarding others and their religious views as inferior or "wrong"). Extremists furthermore tend to reject authority, spread anti-social doctrines, are prepared to use violence against the status quo and authority, show hatred, aggression and anger towards others who are different, and are easily provoked. Wahl (2004: 18) correctly concludes that it is difficult to know everything about the genesis of extremism, particularly how it manifests in a specific individual (Von Hippel, 2002: 25-26).

Education as boundary-setting by educators is nowadays increasingly under pressure due to problems associated with globalisation, migration, social transformation processes and the role of the social media. These developments seem to be contributing to the inadequate social

competences and growing prejudice among young people (Rieker, 2004: 5). The next sub-section covers some of the social conditions that seem to be conducive to the inculcation of religious extremism in young people.

Social conditions and actions conducive to causing religious radicalism in young people

Feeling driven by a cause

A young person might resort to extremist behaviour to realise the particular religious, cultural or political ideals of his or her religious group (SAPA-AP, 2015: 7). The issue of being driven by a specific cause could be connected to the "normal" confusion that adolescents experience in developing their worldviews.

Exploitation of the confusion in the minds of adolescents

The values-confusion that adolescents tend to struggle with can intensify when they are exposed to conflicting sets of values, such as young Orientals growing up in the West or that youngsters in the Middle and Far East experience due to influences from the West in the form of books, journals, the internet, social media, television and other media. As "completely normal" adolescents they struggle with the forming of their identities and worldviews, are uncertain about how to behave in the globalised world, how to see themselves and how to make life-choices. This struggle exacerbates when they find themselves living in two different and sometimes conflicting "value worlds".

Exploitation of the young person's struggle to form an own Identity

Instead of helping the young person develop a secure identity without labelling or "hardening" it in the form of an essentialist identity (bringing home the notion that a person is "essentially" a female, or a Christian, or a Muslim, a Buddhist or agnostic and that this conditions every part of who the person is) an influential person might be intent on instilling an awareness in the youngster that he or she is part of a group and not an individual with personal ideals and aspirations apart from the group. The youngster begins to develop a perception of self as similar or even identical to all the other members of an in-group. This can be described as a process of depersonalisation and of collective identity (also referred to as "miniaturisation"; see below).

Rooting of the young person' life-view in a collective narrative

The religious faith, cultural or political beliefs of an influential person in a youngster's life

might be rooted in the former's collective narrative, in the story that his or her side tells of itself, its identity, its aspirations, its perceived role in the conflict for which the young person is being recruited, and also its past and current history (Salaam, 2013). History in particular, according to Kupermintz and Salomon (2005: 294), holds a faction in a firm grip that tends to ignite its members and sustain the continuation of the conflict with the other side / the enemy / the adversary.

"Miniaturisation" of the young person

Being assigned to a specific community (e.g. Somali, female, disabled, Christian, Afrikaner) implies the absence of personal choice and leads to the "miniaturisation" of the person. Miniaturisation is a process that pressurises the person into accepting the notion that he or she is part of a physical and homogenous group or reality. Miniaturisation can be observed in adolescents joining gangs and cliques, closely-knit social groups from which it is difficult to extricate oneself (Wahl, 2004: 17). The question is: when does solidarity with a group become nepotism and give rise to frustration, anger and hatred (Davies, 2009: 188)?

Inculcation of epistemic rigidity in the young person

Epistemic rigidity is the strong adherence to one's narrative and position and the rejection of information that threatens collectively held beliefs (Kupermintz & Salomon, 2005: 294-297). Strong negative emotions such as anxiety and anger interfere with cognitive performance in general, and with attempts to change attitudes in general.

Use of the social media

Experts agree that young people all over the world are being lured by propaganda (Modjadji, 2015: 3). Pennington (2012: 285) avers that steady exposure to audio and visual images (in the form of music, video games and subtle messages) tends to shape both the perceptions of young people and contribute to intergroup prejudices. By manipulating images through the priming of truncated sound bites and by using ideas and information in a selective manner extremist factions attempt to promote the formation of religious, cultural or political sensibilities in young people that can alter their moral logic against the sanctity of other parties. The unseen online radicalisation of young individuals is difficult to contain since one cannot erect a firewall for ideas.

Inculcation of a sense of asymmetries of power and status in the young person

Influential people in a young person's life might attempt to induce in the young person a sense of asymmetries of power and status: the own side is portrayed as being discriminated against, as always unjustly treated by more powerful forces (such as "the West," the "East," the state or the status quo) or as a martyr (Armstrong, 2014: 28).

Portrayal of "the other" as a threat

An influential person such as an educator might guide the young person to perceive the other party (the rival, the adversary, the enemy) as the distant other (Kupermintz & Salomon, 2005: 298) who has no empathy for the youth and his or her people. According to Nussbaum (2012: 21, 29, 102), extremism begins and is inspired by fear of what is deemed to be scary and foreign. People tend to feel threatened by others whom they do not know (104). The fear is fed by disinformation about what is feared; the fear is therefore inaccurate (22, 35, 199). The fear may also be reinforced by an exaggeration of one's own vulnerability: the person might see the putative threat as a sudden tear in the fabric of his or her invulnerability. The fear might then be reinforced by cascading: other individuals responding to the person's fearful behaviour might join him or her, and they begin defining their religious or ethnic identity as a group in opposition to the "other" that is feared.

Stereotyping and stigmatisation

Influential people in the youth's life might make use of stereotyping (Nawaz, 2014: 170) and stigmatisation (Rieker, 2004: 6), i.e. of a stock-image that is framed in part by irrational fear which makes the identity of the youth and his or her group a source of social disadvantage (Nussbaum, 2012: 236). Confronted with the stereotype of what 'a true Muslim' or 'a true Christian' must be like, young people find themselves in a quandary: do they follow the stereotype, or do they resist it by trying to act "normally" as all balanced and sane people in their community supposedly do (cf. Nawaz, 2014, xx; Govender, 2015: 14)?

The role of education in promoting extremism

In a recent number of the *International Journal for Religious Freedom*, Thomas Johnson (2014: 9-12) presented a dual perspective with respect to our understanding and handling of religious extremism. Firstly, in addition to all the different conditions that might cause religious extremism in young people he argues that they might be prompted to join extremist groups due to their search for meaning in life. Religious extremism, Johnson (2014: 11) believes, is partly a response to a perceived meaning deficit in people's civil communities.

The second idea that flows from Johnson's thesis regarding a search for meaning among the young people is the need to address the "meaning question." In addition to the ultimate meaning that people derive from their religion, Johnson (2014:10) argues, "there are (also) multiple secondary meanings that are properly experienced in our multiple civil communities." These secondary meanings include the practising of justice, honesty, diligence, loyalty, mercy and the recognition of human dignity and duties. To this list can be added secondary meanings such as respect, peaceful coexistence (*modus vivendi*), awareness of differences, human rights, morality, personal integrity (Nolan, 2009: 13; Schneller, 2011: 175) and trust (Ariely, 2010: 127-128). These secondary meanings are real and address in part the human search for meaning (Johnson, 2014: 11).

All parents and religious groupings wish for their children to grow up to become mature individuals that would find meaning in life and fulfil their calling, be useful citizens, well socialized and able to lead a sensible life that could contribute not only to their own well-being but also to that of society in general (Van Crombrugge, 2006: 11). Ideally, the education of all children would embody actions on the part of their educators in the home, the school and the religious community such as a church, synagogue or a mosque to help the child become what he or she is supposed to become one day as a member of society, the nation-state and on the trans- and international stage (Rieker, 2004: 6). In an ideal world, all educators would devote their time and energies to the leading, guiding, equipping and unfolding of the child's potential to become a mature and responsible person able to contribute to the well-being of society (Nussbaum, 2011: 23). In a nutshell: education for religious extremism is the diametric opposite of education for tolerance, forgiveness, hospitality and the promotion of a peaceful and stable *modus vivendi,* also on the world stage.

There are indications that the seed of extremism are sown in some cases already in early childhood (Rieker, 2004: 6) particularly in cases where the individual attributes and behavioural characteristics of a young person are amenable to strong influences (Salaam, 2013: 50). Many of young people become radicalised during their formative years (Erikson et al., 2015). Youngsters between the ages of 15 and 21 seem to be particularly open to influences that might lead to radicalisation (see, for instance, Sitzer and Heitmeyer [2003: 170-173]).

Analysis of the documentation about the lives and actions of individuals who have deviated from the "normal" path of becoming well socialized citizens and members of their

communities revealed that most of them became radicalised in the period of late adolescence due to the impact of an assemblage of (negative) influences on their lives, particularly as far as their religion (and culture) was concerned. As a result, they adopted anti-social attitudes and engaged in actions that were detrimental to the general well-being of society. It seems that radicalisation results from forms of negative pedagogy or even anti-pedagogy which entails a process of closing the minds of young people to opinions that do not support the views and ideology of their educators. This, as Nussbaum (2012: 21, 22, 29, 35, 102, 104 199) has argued, leads to fear of the other and of the unknown. The fear, as she concluded, may also be reinforced by an exaggeration of own vulnerability. The fear that is harboured by the individual and his or her group tends to preclude love and compassion (Nussbaum, 2012: 91). The nett result of this entire process is failure to acknowledge the equal reality of others, of society as plural and diverse and of the ethical mandate to treat all members with equal respect (Nussbaum, 2012: 102, 137).

Educators in all societies plagued by religious extremism (including South Africa which experienced a knife attack at a mosque in Verulam, Kwazulu-Natal quite recently, in early May 2018, leaving one person dead and two others seriously injured) need to develop a constructive strategy to prevent religious extremism and radicalisation that, as argued above, is often influenced by misplaced perceptions of "the other" as the enemy. The following two sections are devoted to an outline of this task.

Education to counteract extremism

Based on the analysis above, it is safe to say that extremism is complex and multi-faceted. It is, therefore, difficult to generalise about religious extremism and how to educate to counter it. Education itself is likewise multi-dimensional (Preston, Feinstein & Anderson, 2005: 289, 303-304). A two-pronged approach seems to be indicated to counteract the forces that threaten to radicalise young people and galvanise them into extremist attitudes and actions. Firstly, parents and other educators should concentrate on guiding, steering, equipping and leading the children entrusted to them in a balanced manner so that they will never feel indoctrinated, thereby lured into radicalisation and extremism. Secondly, parents and other educators should inform themselves of each aspect of the radicalisation process outlined above, and take thoughtful measures to counteract them (Von Hippel, 2002: 28 ff.).

Many countries have in the past experienced cultural trauma due to religious extremism. The nature of the trauma is dependent on the socio-cultural context of the affected society at the

time of the historical event (Smelser, 2004: 36). An excellent example of the cultural trauma suffered by a group of people is the holocaust, an historical event the memories of which are being kept alive among the younger generation by educators, chronicles and "online commemoration of the trauma" (Lazar & Hirsch, 2014: 72). Much the same has been occurring in South Africa after the demise of apartheid in 1994 (Naidoo, 2009: 156). However, instead of keeping the past associated with these atrocities alive in parental homes and in schools, both parents and education authorities should apply their minds to channelling the energies and aspirations of the upcoming generations into more peaceful, tolerant and forgiving ways. The basic education policy documents of a country should reflect this non-extremist and tolerant stance and strategy, as will now be demonstrated in terms of the situation in South Africa.

Implications for Education Policy Documents

Views about religious and other forms of extremism as well as about what could be done by educators such as teachers to counteract them ideally should reflect in the education policy documents of all countries. However, reference to religious and other forms of extremism and anti-social behaviour could be construed as negative and hence not well-suited to the tone of policy statements the purpose of which is to portray in positive terms what is locally, nationally and internationally (globally) aimed at in a nation's education. Reference to religious extremism and the steps to be taken to pre-empt, avoid and eradicate such behaviour could therefore be perceived as contrary to the spirit of policy documentation. However, we have reached such a point worldwide that we cannot any longer overlook the threat of religious, cultural and political forms of extremist behaviour and therefore have to deal with it in our respective nation-states' education policy documents.

Education policy in South Africa can be used to illustrate this point. Education in South Africa is regulated by several acts of parliament as well as by three key policy documents, namely the *Manifesto on Values, Education and Democracy* (RSA, 2001), the *National Policy on Religion Education* (RSA, 2003) and the *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements* (RSA, 2011). It is recommended that the issue of religious and other forms of extremism and anti-social behaviour be explicitly discussed and evaluated in these documents in an effort to sensitize educators about the urgency of adopting didactical-pedagogical measures to pre-empt, avoid and eradicate all forms of such behaviour in their students. How this can be done can be illustrated with reference to each of these three policy documents.

The *Manifesto on Values, Education and Democracy* (RSA, 2001) never uses the word

"extremism" (it refers to "our extremely violent society" in one instance – p. 51), and in general does not seem to attend to the existence or the potential existence of religious, cultural or political violence or extremism. It is clear, however, that this document does not condone any form of extremism or extremist behaviour. The document enjoins teachers and other educators to guide the learners to become balanced future citizens of South Africa, aware of living according to values such as social justice and equity (p. 12-13), non-racism and non-sexism, *Ubuntu* (human dignity) (p. 14), an open society, accountability and responsibility (p. 14), respect (p. 15) and reconciliation (p. 16). This list of positive educational values is followed with a discussion of several educational strategies to bring these values home to learners (p. 17 ff.): infuse the classroom with a culture of human rights (p. 13), introduce religion in schools in a balanced manner (p. 31), promote anti-racism in schools (p. 42) and nurture patriotism and affirm our common citizenship (p. 56). It is clear from this brief overview that the spirit and thrust of the *Manifesto* is opposed to extremism in whatever form. This stance nevertheless can be reinforced by an insertion in which religious, cultural and political extremism is mentioned by name and expressly condemned and rejected.

The *National Policy on Religion Education* (RSA, 2003) likewise never employs the word "extremism" although it deals in its entirety with how religion education and religious observances should be managed in schools. The formulators of this policy appear not to have regarded religious and other forms of extremism as an issue to specifically attend to. The basic assumption, it seems, is that while parents and religious institutions such as churches, mosques and synagogues are allowed to educate their children in and into their chosen religion (religious instruction, paragraphs 54-57), this should be done in a pedagogically balanced manner and should not result in bigotry, extremism or fanaticism. The same applies for the religion education offered in schools (paragraphs 17-57) and for the religious observances that occur in schools (paragraphs 58-65). All of these activities should be balanced and equitable and promote respect for members of different religious persuasions. Also in the case of this policy document, the underlying message is that all educators in South Africa should steer clear of any form of religious or other forms of bigotry, disrespect, intolerance and extremism. The message would have had more impact, however, if religious extremism were explicitly mentioned and rejected as an aim of religious education / religion instruction, whether in public or private schools or in private institutions such as churches, mosques and synagogues.

The *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements* (CAPS; RSA, 2011) is an enormous document that embraces every aspect of the South African school curriculum as well as all the concomitant assessment procedures. Just as in the case of the two documents discussed above, the basic message of the CAPS is positive, which probably explains why no reference is ever made to religious extremism or extremist behaviour in any form. To illustrate: the Life Orientation programme for the last three grades of schooling (10-12) embodies six topics: development of self in society, social and environmental responsibility, democracy and human rights, careers and career choices, study skills and physical education (par. 2.1). It is clear from the specific aims of Life Orientation that religious and other forms of extremism are to be avoided. Among others, the Life Orientation programme aims to guide and prepare learners to respond appropriately to life's responsibilities; equip learners to interact optimally on a personal, psychological, cognitive, motor, physical, moral, spiritual, cultural and socio-economic level; guide learners to make informed and responsible decisions about their own health and well-being and the health and well-being of others and to expose learners to their constitutional rights and responsibilities, to the rights of others and to issues of diversity (par. 2.2). Also in this case, the message could have been more deliberate and explicit that religious and other forms of extremism are pitfalls that should be avoided at all costs in a democracy and by those aspiring to a peaceful *modus vivendi* in their society, their nation-state and also globally.

Conclusion

The core of the problem of religious and other forms of extremism is the radicalisation of young people through the processes of education gone awry or what some would term indoctrination, i.e. refusal on the part of the educator to allow youngsters freedom of choice about how they wish to understand and practise their religion in socially acceptable ways. For some reason, charismatic educators and other influential people in youngsters' lives seem to be able to turn young people from the age of around ten to twenty years of age away from the moderate practising of their religion and culture and instil in them an ideological zeal to expend their time, energies and ideals in the interest of reaching certain ideological ideals. The result of this turning of their minds and hearts is to morph them into extremists, fanatics and fundamentalists, a-social individuals rejected by their moderate religious counterparts and hunted by the security forces. One way to counter this threat is to appeal to all spiritual leaders and other educators to educate responsibly. A revisiting of education policy

documents dealing with the issue of the forming of youngsters into balanced practitioners of their own religions also seems necessary. Religious extremism should be mentioned by name, condemned and rejected, and alternative ways of practising one's religion be demonstrated.

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