

THE RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS INCITING EXTREME ATTITUDE AMONG PEOPLE TOWARDS RELIGION: A CASE STUDY OF CONFLICT IN THE NORTH-WEST PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

The mutual relationship of war and religion is one of the most debated issues in the contemporary scholarship in social sciences. War and religion are related to each other in multiple ways. Most studies explain how religion affects the war; however, some other studies focus on how the war affects the religion and religiosity. This study comes under the purview of the latter set of studies. I have tried to explore and explain how the conflict in the North-western Pakistan in post 2000 era has influenced the religiosity of the affected people in this area. For this purpose I adopted the qualitative approach and mainly relied on the primary technique while collecting the data. I conducted semi-structured interviews in the Districts Khyber, North Waziristan and South Waziristan. Contrary to the earlier researches on the subject, I found that the war (in the study area) has affected the religion and religiosity in a complex way: on the one hand it increased the religiosity among the people as number of practicing Muslims increased during this period in this area, while on the other hand, it has also turned many others as non-religious. Moreover, I observed that this conflict/war caused extreme attitudes among people towards religion as some became ultra-religious while some other became ultra-secular at the same time.

Keywords: War, Religion, War on Terror, Islam, Pakhtun Region

INTRODUCTION

War and religion have a complex and multifaceted relationship. There are a number of ways in which both affect each other; and neither becomes a constant independent variable in their mutual relationship (Silvestri and Mayall, 2015). A recent study shows that war has the tendency to increase religiosity in the society in terms of people becoming more conservative and practicing religion in their daily lives. The results of the study show that people, following the shock and strain of seeing a friend or loved one killed or injured during a war, become more religious (Henrich et al., 2019). This is true as anything which potentially poses an existential threat to a person or society at large will likely increase religiosity. This happens because people

unconsciously try to develop a defense mechanism in situations of enhanced insecurity; and religion gives them a sense of protection. In fact the origin of religion itself lies in 'fear' i.e. fear of hunger, illness, failure and destruction: fear and threat forced people to find refuge in religion (Walpert, 2017). War exposes society to uncertainty and insecurity that is why religiosity increases in a war-ravaged society. However, the role that religion plays in this regard is not limited only to the destruction of war but anything that triggers the fear of death and destruction increases tendency towards religion e.g. after the earthquake in Christchurch, New Zealand in 2011, people of the affected region became more religious compared to the people of other areas (Walpert, 2017).

The above-mentioned relationship between war and religion/religiosity has been established as a fact in a number of studies regarding various conflicts/wars. However, war may not have always increased religiosity in all conflicts. The relationship between war and religiosity is not straight-forward. The nature and cause of the war itself are important and can determine the fate of religion and religiosity in a war-ravaged society. War increases religiosity in societies where the nature of war is completely or broadly secular i.e. where the war is the result of some ethnic, political or economic issues. Nevertheless, where the nature of war/conflict is entirely or mainly religious, this relationship between war and religiosity becomes more complex and wide-ranging. In other words the religious conflicts, where the bone of contention itself is the religion, leave a polarizing impact on the society. Such conflicts have the tendency to infuse religious-based division in the society in the context of religiosity: some would become increasingly religious and some other would become increasingly nonreligious. The conflict in the Pakistan-Afghanistan region following the September 11, 2001 incident has emerged as a war where the religion has played the role of a driving force at least on one side i.e. the Taliban, while cheered on by their likeminded, have been trying to impose their own version of *Shariah* (Islamic law) in the region through an armed conflict. On the other hand, however, there has been an increasing trend among a section of population to become religiously less observant. As a resident of the area I have observed people becoming both religious and nonreligious as a result of this armed conflict.

Literature Review

Henrich, Bauer, Cassar, and Purzycki in their article "War Increases Religiosity" have analyzed interview responses from individuals in three different countries that had suffered long, fierce internal conflicts: Sierra Leone's civil war, 1991-2002; the Lord's Resistance Army insurgency in Uganda, 1986-2006; and Tajikistan's civil war and continuing political violence. The results of the research showed that people who had been more intensely affected by the severity of war were more likely to link with or partake in religious groups and practice religious rituals. The more deep the impact of war on a person e.g. the death, injury or

kidnapping of a family member, the greater the chances grew of that person turning to religion. On the other hand, those who had been less affected by the impact of war were also less likely to join a religious group. In this quantitative study the statistical breakdown showed that for those in Sierra Leone, greater exposure to war made it 12% more likely people would turn to religion; 14% more for those in Uganda; and 41% more for Tajikistan (Henrich et al., 2019).

In another article "War, Worries and Religiousness", Du and Chi presented the same ideas that death related threats increase people's involvement in religious rituals and activities. They assumed that since war was a death related activity, it would be concomitant with more religiousness. The authors argued that war incites the potentials of dedication and belief in human beings. Using a worldwide sample they concluded that people were more religious when their cities suffered more from armed conflicts. They further elucidated that people in countries with existing wars and conflicts experienced higher levels of worries about war and, in turn, showed increased religiousness. In other words they partially explained the relationship between war and religion by the 'worries about war' (Du and Chi, 2016).

In the above mentioned earlier work the authors have heavily relied on statistical data and did not do a qualitative analysis to dig more into the complex relationship between war and religion. Moreover, their research revolves around the cases where nature of war was political and not religious. However, in my study I took the case where the nature of conflict is politico-religious. Further, I did not rely on merely statistical data, rather did a thematic analysis of the data to understand the multifaceted relationship between two variables – war and religion.

Methodology

Qualitative: The study aimed at analyzing the impact of the (religious) war, in the north-western part of Pakistan, on the society in the context of increasing or decreasing religiosity. For this purpose I mostly relied on the primary data while adopting qualitative method of inquiry. Since, the earlier studies heavily relied on quantitative data, I adopted the qualitative approach by conducting detailed interviews with the people of the area.

Interviews: I conducted around 100 interviews with the people of the area. The principle of saturation was adopted while collecting the primary data through interviews. The interviews were semi-structured: though I followed an interview schedule but kept it flexible to ask counter questions during the interviews. The majority questions were open-ended leaving enough space for the respondents to express their thoughts and ideas in detail. Most of the interviews were in Pashto language, and I did the translations work myself.

Further, the age, gender and education of the respondents were also taken into consideration while collecting the data. Since, the study revolves around the conflict in the North-west of Pakistan in the post 2000 period, I preferred to interview people with age of above 40 years to possibly make a comparison between their attitudes towards religion before and after the war started in the region. Finding and interviewing equal number of women was difficult because of cultural constraints, that is why the number of female respondents was lower than the male respondents. Following the convenience sampling technique I interviewed people from Districts Khyber, North Waziristan and South Waziristan.

Ethical considerations: To protect the identities and ensure the safety of the research participants – particularly given the sensitive nature of the topic – all names of interviewees have been changed. Pseudonyms have been used throughout the text. This measure was taken in accordance with ethical research standards.

Thematic Analysis: While analyzing the interviews I used the Thematic Analysis Technique to interpret the data which entailed searching across the data set to identify and report the repeated patterns.

Along with the primary source of interview I also used the secondary sources/material during the research by reading books, research articles and newspapers. Following are the major findings and themes I identified in my research.

War turns people more religious

In this part of the study I have discussed how war in the North-western part of Pakistan increased religiosity among a segment of population. A study by Hongfei Du of Guangzhou University

and Peilian Chi of the University of Macau indicates that the greater exposure to war make it more likely that people turn out to be more religious, become part of religious groups and practice religious rituals. That was their takeaway after analyzing responses from individuals around the world contained in the 2010 World Values Survey (Du and Chi, 2016). In a post-conflict environment, religion can function as a psychological cushion against concerns about future conflicts, they write – and can also help people achieve a strong sense of belonging to a group.

While conducting the fieldwork survey and interviews with the people of the study area, a general impression was that people have become more religious and practicing Muslims as a result of the conflict in this region. More detailed analysis of the data, I collected through interviews, further revealed that this increased religiosity was not limited only to the participating in particular rituals but adopting extreme and fundamentalist approach regarding certain religious concept and ideals such as *Jihad*. In the following lines I have highlighted some of the main themes I found in the data related to religiosity. These different themes indicate how much diversity is there within the religiously conservative people from being merely pro-social and supportive to others to passive supporters of terrorist activities. This diversity within the religious groups proves that the war has invoked radical and extreme behavior among people alongside making them more practicing Muslims. Some of the important indicators of being more religious are as follow:

Supportive: Every religion of the world attaches great importance with the morality and moral values. The adherents of any religion identify themselves as moral beings and when they are more inclined towards the religion they adopt certain moral values in their behavior. Being supportive to others is one of the notable attributes of being moral person. A large number of individuals of my study area turned more supportive to their fellows in their mutual relations. Their supportiveness was the result of becoming more religious. During and after the war people cared about others and showed this care by deeds not just by words. Hayat Khan, one of my uneducated respondents, said that this war brought him more close to his own people and he could feel the pain and trauma they were going

through in those troubled times. He felt sympathetic and ready to help out others as much as he could. While referring to a saying of the Holy Prophet (PBUH), he said that the Muslim Ummah is like a human body. If one part is hurt, its pain is felt by the entire body. He said: “*Che yo musulman pa taklif k wi nu tol ummat pa taklif k wi*” (H. Khan, personal communication, October 25, 2019).

Cooperative: Similar to supportiveness is the quality of being cooperative. Another moral/religious trait that was observed among the people of study area during the research was cooperativeness. Some of the respondents expressed that this war brought obvious changes in their behavior. They were of the opinion that the ultimate goal of all individuals is common i.e. salvation and well-being in this world and hereafter. Samad, one of my uneducated respondents, was of the view that common goals could be achieved through joint effort and cooperation. He said: “*zamung tolo maqsad da akhirat kamyabi da aw de da para yo bal sara marasta pakar de*” (Samad, personal communication, October 25, 2019).

Generous: During the field work it was observed that generally the people were very generous. Though being generous is one of the cultural values of *Pakhtuns* particularly that of the tribal areas, however, it was noticed that the twenty years long war made people more generous and kind towards others. The fact that these people went through a trauma of losing their nears and dears during the conflict, made them realize that the world is temporary and short. This particular realization made them big-hearted and magnanimous. Ibrahim, one of my educated respondents who had a rivalry/animosity with another family, revealed that he forgave his enemies who killed his brother, for the will of God (Ibrahim, personal communication, September 16, 2019). Although, taking revenge is a primary feature of *Pakhtunwali*, some families disregarded this sociocultural norm under the influence of religion. Ibrahim’s case was an example where his family forgave the murderer just for the sake of God.

Offering prayers: One of the important indicators of determining the level of religiosity among

Muslims is to measure the frequency of offering daily prayers by them. It was concluded during the research that majority of the respondents started offering prayers more frequently and regularly during the ‘war on terror’ as compared to how they did in this regard before year 2004. One of the uneducated respondents, Junaid Afridi said: “*Makhkay ba ma kala kala munz kawo; os Alhamdolillah pinza wakht munz kawom*” (Previously I rarely used to offer prayers; now I pray regularly). While replying to another question, he said: *Da juand hes pata nishta kala khatma shi. Hara ruwaz ya damaka kegi ya khudkush kegi; ensaan ta pakat de da akhirat tayorey wuki*” (J. Afridi, personal communication, September 18, 2019). (The life has become so uncertain due to everyday bombings and suicides; one should focus on preparing for the world hereafter).

Going to mosque: Another indicator that I used in my study to measure the level of religiosity among people of the study area was frequency of people going to the mosque. While interviewing an Imam¹ of a mosque in the study area, it was revealed that mosque attendants have increased during the war/conflict time as compared to the situation before the military operation started in the area. Islam Gul, an Imam of the mosque confirmed that people turned more observant of Islam and started coming to the mosque more regularly ever since the war started in our region (I. Gul, personal communication, September 18, 2019). Most of the respondents held the similar opinion and shared that they have observed an increase in the number of people visiting mosques to offer prayers as compared to the pre-war period when people had more casual approach towards performing religious rituals and going to mosques. This tendency was more visible and evident in the settled areas as compared to the tribal areas where going to mosque was a common practice among majority male population even before the conflict began in the region. Hazrat Ali, one of the educated interviewees, expressed that he could see a noticeable change in people as now they were more inclined towards Islam and practicing religious norms and traditions as they did before the war (H. Ali, personal communication, September 21, 2019).

Other rituals: During the fieldwork it was observed that a large population of the study area turned more practicing Muslims during and post-conflict period as compared to how they were before the conflict. There is a general agreement on the fact that the people who are more intensely affected by the violence of war are more likely to participate in religious group and practice religious rituals. However, this impact of war over the religiosity of individuals varies with varying degree of exposure to the atrocities of war: The more a person experiences the effects of war such as death, injuries or abduction, etc. the more he or she is likely to become religious and practicing religious rituals. Though over centuries, these *Pakhtun* tribes had been following the code of *Pakhtunwali* in their daily social life, the conflict in post 2000 period profoundly affected their socio-cultural life; and religion became more visible and dominant in determining their social behavior. Chaman Gul, a seventy years old uneducated respondent, who himself claimed to become more religious, said that he noticed a visible change among the people in terms of observing religious rites and customs such as performing pilgrimage and paying *Zakat*, etc. People were now more inclined towards practicing these rituals, he added. However, about fasting, one of the basic pillars of Islam, he said that people observed this ritual more commonly even before the recent conflict started in the region. Fasting was defined by people more cultural tradition than purely religious, he expressed (C. Gul, personal communication, October 20, 2019).

Pro Talibanism: One of main arguments on which I based my current study is that the post 2000 conflict in the North-western part of Pakistan incited more extreme behaviors among people towards religion – Islam. The degree of becoming more religious ranged from being practicing Muslims in some cases to becoming hardcore fundamentalists and supporting extremist religious groups and ideas. The conflict in tribal and settled *Pakhtun* areas resulted in the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. This fundamentalism had two aspects; first, the rise of extremism in the society; second, the emergence of ultra-religious political forces and their rise to political power.

The emergence of political Islam in the Pak-Afghan borderland dates back to the Soviet-

Afghan war during 1980s, however, the September 11, 2001 incident became the point of revival and resurgence of such trend. The subsequent War on Terror and military operations in the *Pakhtun* belt brought and strengthened the wave of extremism in the region. This time the effects of radicalism and extremism became more visible and severe on both sides of the border as compared to 1980s. In Pakistan, the wave of religious extremism primarily affected the *Pakhtuns*. The Ex- Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa underwent an unprecedented era of terrorism and destruction. Thousands of *Pakhtuns* have died and hundreds of thousand other displaced and injured since 2001. Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) became a ground reality and the state had to deal with them through multiple strategies ranging from dialogues to using sheer force during the military operations. During the study I observed that a substantial number of people had sympathies with Taliban and supported their struggle for so called “Shariatization” in the country. One of my educated interviewees, Imran was of the opinion that *Pakhtuns* are simple and emotional people and anyone could befool them easily in the name of Islam. He said:

“We [*Pakhtuns*] are very emotional people and love our religion. Our straight forwardness is our weakness (*zmung sadgi zmunnga kamzori da*). People befool us easily in the name of Islam. We [*Pakhtuns*] are not smart, we are not properly educated that’s why we don’t understand the true Islam and are easily exploited.” In his opinion the war in this region made people more extremists and supportive of Taliban (Imran, personal communication, October 20, 2019).

Indirect support for and justifying suicide attacks: The post 2000 conflict in the North-western part of Pakistan witnessed an unprecedented increase of terrorism in the region. Apart from bombing, shooting and target killing, the suicide attacks were relatively new phenomenon in this regard. During the conflict Pakistan military has conducted three major operations to counter terrorism: first was conducted in 2004 in former South Waziristan Agency by General Pervaiz Musharraf; the second was conducted during the democratic period in 2009 in the settled *Pakhtun* district Swat and third was started in 2014 in former North

Waziristan agency. Besides, a number of small scale military operations were conducted in various agencies of Ex-FATA during this period. The security situation in the *Pakhtun* region of Pakistan has not been normal since 2001. This era has witnessed the increase in the influence of radical Islamist movements particularly in *Khyber Pakhtunkhwa* and Ex-FATA. The growing influence of radical Islamist movements itself is an evidence that these movements and groups acquired the support of general public in the name of religion – Islam. Supporting these groups means the indirect support for the suicide bombings that these groups were involved in. Hence, it is observed that the war/conflict has caused extremism in people's attitude towards religion. Imran, an educated respondent said that there were a considerable number of people who had sympathies with the suicide bombers who supported them passively. These people were religious minded people who turned ultra-religious and fundamentalists during the war, he added.

One of the main factors for the religious extremism among the people of this area is that they have seen their friends and relatives dying and being injured in the war. Resorting to violence religious extremism was a natural outcome when innocent people were killed during the conflict, Imran said (Imran, personal communication, October 20, 2019).

During the study I observed that the war in this region not only increased religiosity among some people but at the same time caused extremism in the name of religion among some others. Hence, it can be said that the religiosity among people had different variations and types ranging from simple offering prayers to supporting violence in the name of *Jihad*.

War turns people secular

In this part of the study I have discussed that how the war in the study area affected the people in terms of making them less religious and in some cases non-religious and secular. One of the main arguments of my current study is that war not only makes some people more religious but at the same time has the tendency to turn some others nonreligious in theory and practice. In other words war incites extreme behavior among people towards religion which makes some of them either ultra-religious on the one hand while making

some others ultra-secular on the other hand. In this section the indicators, of being non-religious, I used range from less participation in religious rituals to staunch support to the ideas of secularism and atheism. Following are some the indicators which show how the conflict in North-western Pakistan infused the ideals secularism among a segment of society and caused an indifferent attitude towards religion among them.

Decrease in practice of religious rituals: It is a fact, as discussed in the previous section, that war in this region has increased religiosity among a group of people. They became more participative in religious customs and rituals. This was a natural outcome of the war as it endangered people's life and they, in a way, took mental refuge in the religious beliefs. Religion provided them with a sense of peace and security through the promise of a better life hereafter. However, on the other hand a group of people emerged who adopted an otherwise approach and their participation in religious rituals decreased as a result of war. Bahadar Khan, one of my educated respondents, revealed that previously he used to be very religious and conservative person. He had grown beard and used to be a practicing Muslim. He said:

I was not the same as I look now; I had a long beard and used to wear a cap on my head all the time when out of home. I used to wear only traditional clothes (*shalwar qameez*). I used to recite *Quran* daily. I used to hold and host religious gatherings such as *Milaad Sharif*. But now you can see I have changed. The war in our region has changed my life. I lost my interest in religious norms and traditions. I hate Taliban and those who use the name of religion to rule over us (B. Khan, personal communication, June 10, 2021).

Bahadar was one of those some respondents, who believed that supporting the religious ideas and ideals was to support the barbarism of terrorists who exploit the religious sentiments of the common people and use them for their own vested interest. Some other respondents shared the similar opinion that the war has affected the religious aspect of many people in a negative way as their participation in religious rituals and formalities has decreased drastically due to so called 'holy war'.

People visiting mosques less frequently: Although the overall ratio of people going to

mosque for offering prayers has increased in the post war period in the area as claimed by the Islam Gul, an Imam of a mosque and many others (I. Gul, personal communication, September, 2019). However, on the other hand, it cannot be ignored that many people have either stopped going to mosques or their frequency of visiting mosques has dropped drastically. Hina Gul, an educated female respondent, said that her husband goes to the mosque only once or twice a year to offer Eid prayer only; while he used to go regularly previously. She said:

My husband was very conservative and religious minded person and used to go to the mosque five times a day. However, with the passage of time, his approach towards religion changed. He [her husband] believes that mullahs support the war and they use mosques to promote and preach their fundamentalist and extremist ideas (H. Gul, personal communication, March 05, 2021).

Hina Gul further expressed that the international powers imposed war upon us for twenty years. This war assumed the shape of a religious war between good and evil. Terrorism was promoted in the name of religion and not even the mosques and sacred places remained safe in this wave of extremism. This mess affected the life of the youth so badly that they developed revulsion and dislike about the religious norms and culture, she added (H. Gul, personal communication, March 05, 2021).

Casual approach towards prayers: One of the most important indicators of measuring how much a Muslim or a group of Muslims are religious is their frequency of offering prayers. As far as my study area is concerned, over the past twenty years, undoubtedly, the number of people who offer prayers has increased. People go to the mosques and offer prayers at home (especially women). This number and ratio of the people who regularly say prayers (*salaah*) is greater than it was twenty years ago. However, it does not necessarily indicate that the war alone has increased religiosity in this region. Saying this will be an oversimplification of how one understands this trend. One should bear in mind that the overall population has also increased in this area over the past two decades, which may have a positive impact on the number of people offering regular prayers. The 2017 census shows that the population of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Ex-FATA

has increased by 71.9% and 57.2% respectively (Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Though, majority of the respondents held the view that the number of practicing Muslims has increased over the last more than two decades, however, a considerable number of respondents also held that the number of non-practicing Muslims has also increased at the same time during this period.

While asked about the reasons for this tendency of a casual approach towards religion and particularly towards offering prayers, many of them attributed this with the terrorism, extremism and religious fundamentalism which invoked antireligious sentiments among the people. Ali Raza, one of my educated interviewees, said:

I lost my father in this so called War on Terror. I never prayed after that incident. He was martyred in a blast while offering Friday prayers in the mosque. We got fed up with the war and hostilities in the region. We got fed up with the use of religion and exploiting the innocent people in the name of Islam. We need education, science, technology, development and economic prosperity. We do not need shallow religious slogans which kept us underdeveloped and exploited by mullahs (A. Raza, personal communication, March 06, 2021).

Ali's views represented the views of many others who saw the atrocities of this war very closely and went through the social and mental trauma after losing their close relatives and friends.

Political secularism: While asked my respondents about how religion was important for them in determining their political affiliation, majority of the respondents considered religion unimportant while making political choices. There were a substantial number of people who believed that religion and politics are two different things and one should not affect the other. Moreover, they held that this is the interplay of the two (religion and politics) that has caused devastating and long-lasting war in the region. The age of the respondents who favored secularism and separation of religion and politics ranged from 40 to 70, however, majority of them were in their 40s. During the interviews, I observed that the war in this region has increased the acceptability of secularism among the people. Most of the respondents, while asked about which political party they liked, mentioned various non-religious political parties. Latif, one of the uneducated

interviewees, argued that while making political decisions or casting our vote, we should give priority to our culture instead of religion. Religion was between man and God, he added (Latif, personal communication, March 05, 2021). Another respondent, Shah Faisal, expressed the similar views and said that religion had nothing to do with politics and political affairs. He further said that our region needed economic development and this should be our consideration while casting our votes in elections (S. Faisal, personal communication, April 03, 2021).

Indifference towards religion: Another major theme that I came across during the interviews was that people viewed religion less important in determining their socio-economic life. This indifferent attitude towards religion, on the part of many, shows that they have become less religious during and after the conflict. When asked about whether he called himself a religious or nonreligious person, Shah Faisal, said that he was neither of the two. *"In fact I do not consider religion as much important for the personality development"*, he said (S. Faisal, personal communication, April 03, 2021).

Historically, the people in the North-west of Pakistan (*Pakhtuns*) happened to be conservative people and the religion played an important part in determining their social behavior along with the code of *Pakhtunwali*. In other words, in the sociological sense Islam is often regarded as the synonym of *Pakhtun* society (Ahmed, 1984). The everyday practice and reappearance of Islamic symbols in the *Pakhtun* society shows the social significance of the religion in sociopolitical sphere. From growing beard by men (a so called symbolic religious practice) to support *Jihadism* (a radical manifestation of religious ideology), *Pakhtun* society, traditionally, has remained a conservative and religious society. However, this trend of considering religion as most relevant in the sociopolitical and economic life is on the decline in this region.

The data collected through interviews suggests that people partially hold the religious groups responsible for the war in the region. Hence, a large number of people have created a distance from religious groups, and traditions subsequently. In other words they no more consider religion relevant and important if they want to focus on their future and development.

Skeptic towards religious beliefs: One unique and extraordinary theme that I drew from the data collected was skepticism about religious beliefs. I found people questioning some basic concepts in religion. When discussing a bomb blast incident and losing his father, Ali Raza was not sure whether the perpetrators of this incident would be punished on the Day of Judgment. He seemed not believing in the world hereafter. "I want justice in this world and that is it. Who saw the next world? Has anyone come back from there? He said:

All this is to keep us blaming our fate and not questioning the people who are actually responsible for our loss and miseries. I don't believe in such concepts of '*sazaa*' and '*jazaa*' on the Day of Judgment. I don't know whether there is really system of justice for us in the next world (A. Raza, personal communication, March 06, 2021).

Ali was one example; and there were many other respondents who were uncertain about the reality of religious beliefs such as *taqdeer* (Destiny), *qayamah* (Day of Judgment) and angels, etc. The war and subsequent socioeconomic and psychological trauma drove these people away from religion as contrary to many others who became more religious after the outbreak of war as discussed above.

Declining spiritualism and rising agnosticism:

The uncertainty and doubt among some was not limited about some religious beliefs, but some other even doubted the existence of a true religion itself. One of the striking psychological effects of war, I observed, on some respondents was that they viewed everything from material point of view. The destruction of war, both in terms of human loss and socioeconomic annihilation, has had such a deep impact on people's psychology that some of them started seeking the materialistic interpretation of everything. Religion which, most of its part relies on spiritual and nonmaterial concepts became a matter of no concern for them. Although this inclination towards agnosticism does not prevail among the majority, yet there are a substantial number of people, especially the younger ones, who have practically become agnostics. Sadiq Malik, one of my educated respondents, was of the view that if God really existed why not He made peace and saved the lives of poor victims of the terrorism S. Malik, personal communication, April, 20, 2021). This attitude

towards the religion, shared by many, was actually the result of ordeal of war destruction that they and their dears went through over the past two decades.

If supporting fundamentalism or justifying suicide attacks, in the name of religion, by some is one extreme behavior the war caused, this indifferent and somewhat doubtful opinion about the religion is the other extreme.

Why two extremes?

The above account shows that the post 2000 conflict in the North-western Pakistan has affected the religion and religiosity among the people in two different ways. Unlike the wars in other parts of the world, the recent war in this region increased the religiosity on the one hand: the number of people going to the mosques and performing religious rituals has increased over the last two decades; however, on the other hand, the war has turned many others secular and indifferent towards religion. In the following lines I have discussed how and why this war affected the religion in a different way as compared to other conflicts in the world.

Nature of the war is religious: The conflict in the *Pakhtun* region of Pakistan was an extension of the Global War on Terror. When the war on terrorism started in late 2001, it was declared as the war between 'Good' and 'Evil' by both sides; i.e. the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, and the rest of the world. The then Bush administration in United States declared it as 'Crusade' against terrorists. This reinforced the fears that the so called war on terror was a war against Muslims (Waldman and Pope, 2001). That is how people started perceiving this war as a religious war. Similarly, the Taliban and Al-Qaeda also took it as war against Muslims and ultimately the war assumed a religious outlook. This made the war different from ordinary political and ethnic conflicts. When an ordinary war, which is based on political, ethnic or territorial issues, it brings people closer to the religion. People seek refuge in the religious concepts of destiny, paradise, martyrdom and life hereafter, etc. This refuge gives them peace of mind and a sense of security from the perils of war and destruction. However, the conflict in this region was not an ordinary political or ethnic conflict rather it was 'religious' conflict as defined by the Bush administration and the Taliban.

This is quite natural that, with the passage of time, people start seeing at the bone of contention with revulsion. In this case they a group of people developed a disfavor about the religion because they perceived religion as the main cause of war and hence of all their miseries. Therefore, this particular conflict caused a divide among the people, making some more religious while making some others secular.

Rise of religious extremism: As discussed in an earlier section, the post 2000 conflict in the North-western Pakistan brought an unprecedented wave of extremism and terrorism in the country in general and in the *Pakhtun* region in particular including Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Ex-FATA. Thousands of *Pakhtuns* have died and hundreds of thousand other displaced and injured since 2001. This era has witnessed the increase in the influence of radical Islamist movements particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Ex-FATA. There are multiple factors responsible for the rise of radical Islam ranging from international political factors to the local cultural factors. Nevertheless, this religious extremism brought a subtle polarization in the society. Extreme attitude in favor of religion caused an extreme attitude against the religion too.

In other words militancy and religious fundamentalism created distaste about religion among a group of people. Zarak Khan, one of the educated respondents, was very critical of the religion and its role in the social and political life of people. He said:

I am totally against the role of religion in our society. What else has the religion given us except war and destruction? The religious groups have destroyed our society in the name of so called so *Jihad*. We have only seen deaths, hatred and devastation in the name of religion and nothing else (Z. Khan, personal communication, September 05, 2019).

Zarak's views show how the war in the region affected people's perception about the religion and its importance. The war, on the one hand, promoted and increased religiosity in the society, on the other hand it promoted the ideas of secularism and agnosticism among a group of people.

Conclusion

War and religion are related to each other in more than one way. There is ample scholarship on their mutual relationship. Scholars have tried to explain and explore how religion plays a role in shaping various conflicts. The concept of 'holy war', in particular, makes this debate interesting and meaningful. There are multiple examples from the history where religion played a decisive role in initiating conflicts. Apart from political, ethnic and territorial disputes, religion has remained another major source of conflicts in the history of mankind.

However, as I mentioned earlier, war and religion have a multifaceted and complex relationship. This is not necessary that they have a causal relationship only, and religion causes wars only. The relationship is much more intricate than it generally appears. We cannot determine which of the two is a constant independent variable and affects the other: war or religion. Both have the tendency to affect the other and that too in multiple ways.

Apart from the scholarship on how religion impacts the conflicts, there are studies about how the wars or conflicts influence the variables like religion and religiosity. One particular finding in the early literature is that war increases religiosity i.e. war or conflicts make people of that area more observant of their religion. However, as a student of politics and a resident of the *Pakhtun* belt of Pakistan, I have observed that the relationship between the two is not simple and straightforward. This led me to explore the relationship between the two from another perspective. My general observation of the War on Terror and its effects on the life of people of this region made me selecting this topic for my current research.

In one of the two main sections of the study I have discussed how war in the North-western Pakistan has increased religiosity among people and how it made them more observant of the religious rituals. The data collected shows that people have become more supportive to and cooperative with others during the conflict. One of the findings was that number of people offering regular prayers and going to mosque have increased over the past two decades which confirms the earlier studies that war increases religiosity. However, it was found during the research, that the effects of the war were not limited only to this; and it caused religious

extremism and fundamentalism in the society. A group of people has turned supportive of the extremist groups and justifying the radical activities like suicide attacks in the name of religion. In other words, war not only increased religiosity but also increased religious extremism in the region.

In the second main section of the study I have discussed how the war in the North-western part of Pakistan has decreased the religiosity. Although quantitatively the number of religiously conservative people has grown over the years, however, on the other hand, the war has turned another group of people nonreligious. During the study I found that there is a group of people who think of the religion as actual bone of contention; hence, they developed a feeling of resentment towards religion over the time. In this section too I have highlighted various themes which show that the amount of resentment towards religion varies from just nonparticipation in the religious rituals to becoming skeptic and agnostic towards religious beliefs and concepts.

With this study I have tried to explain that war not only increases religiosity in a specific society and community but also at the same time it has the tendency to take some others away from the religion and making them less religious to nonreligious altogether. In other words the war in the *Pakhtun* region of Pakistan, over the last twenty years, has impelled extreme attitudes towards religion among the people both in favor and against it.

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