

Book review: "On the Axis of Religious Education: Individual, Crime and Society" by Dr. Kemal Karademir (Istanbul 2018)

by

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Having worked as a Muslim Chaplain (Imam) at a high-security prison in the United Kingdom for many years, the subject of this book, unfortunately only available to me in an inadequate English translation, is of keen interest to me. In the UK, the challenge at the time was to transform a hitherto exclusively Anglican chaplaincy into a multi-faith service catering to all inmates. In the case of Turkey, the author is faced with the task of arguing and validating the importance of religion (Islam) as a beneficial contributor to rehabilitation against the background of a secular constitution which has often served as an excuse to denounce religion as an obstacle to modernisation and hindrance to progress.

Much of the research in this book is therefore devoted to making the case for chaplaincy work in prisons as such, arguing that the teaching of religious morals assists in the re-integration of prisoners into society provided, so the author, it is administered by competent professional individuals. His book explicitly sets out to provide answers to the question of how religious education affects people and society and the role it plays in their mutual relationship, of what "function it has in the social order and in ensuring unity and solidarity". It is based on previous research in a doctoral dissertation entitled "The Role of Religious Education in Reintegrating Criminals into Society" dated 1997 and includes a review of relevant literature, a summary of the current system of education in prisons in Turkey, results from a questionnaire issued to prisoners together with an analysis of the responses and recommendations.

As already mentioned, much of the content of the book is devoted to the specifics of arguing the place of religious education in public institutions, here prisons, in Turkey. My review shall focus on those observations within the text which have wider implications beyond the borders of the Turkish state.

Based on a review of Turkish government statistics, the author claims that the "crime rate increases in parallel with population growth both in our country and in the world", postulating that crime is predominantly an urban problem. To combat this problem, prevention is advocated on the one hand, and "reintegration of criminals into society" on the other. In both scenarios, religion is said to have an "extremely important effect ... on human happiness and social cohesion" and to have "an extraordinary power to change or educate people in a positive way", having a "regulatory function in individual and social life".

It was for that reason, the author explains, that religious education in prisons was thought to be of benefit and re-introduced in the 1970s overseen by the Presidency of Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Justice. The book then proceeds to cite some studies by sociologists and criminologists in the West concerning the relationship

between adherence to religion, practicing religion, and guilt and poses the question of whether religious education given in prisons in Turkey delivers the results based on the findings of those studies, namely “To what extent does religious education have a positive effect on the reintegration of criminals into society”? A set of questions to be put to prisoners in a questionnaire are presented to help provide the answer, some to establish their religious background and practice before incarceration, their age and social background and status, their level of education, etc., others to find out whether there were “any changes in religious belief and worship after being imprisoned”. This is followed by the question as to whether the “effects of the religious knowledge and suggestions they received in prison will continue in their lives after they are released” as well as whether the individuals tasked with providing religious education in prison are properly trained for this task. Thus the research explicitly aimed “to reveal whether the current situation and the legal basis, programs, and practices are sufficient in terms of the moral development, rehabilitation, and reintegration of criminals into society” and culminated in offering some “suggestions for the success of religious education given to criminals”.

In all this the author somehow assumes that secular society and religion agree on what constitutes good morals and what constitutes a sin or a crime, arguing that “religious education ... will enable people to develop spiritually and, accordingly, to adapt to society successfully”. In my view this assumption should not automatically be made, however, since the author is trying to be an apologist for the role of religion within secular Turkish society, it is understandable that he will not focus on or even downplay any potential conflict areas between the two.

His main concern is the question that, if religion has this potential, what might be the reason if it does not have such a powerful effect after all and sees the gap between expectations and outcome in a lack of sound religious education both to young people in general as well as specifically to delinquents after they have committed a crime.

In re-evaluating 450 questionnaires received back from prison establishments as part of his doctoral thesis back in 1997, the author wants to test generally held opinions which state that criminals mostly come from poor family backgrounds, that they have a low level of education in general, that the religious education they receive in prison is adequate to aid their personal development and aid in the prevention of re-offending. Whilst he finds most of these assumptions to be somewhat supported, he is critical of religious education unless based on a sound syllabus and provided by trained professionals: “The wrong religious education may play a role in the commission of a crime instead of preventing the crime”.

When discussing the concept of crime, the author includes the religious perception of sin in addition to the legal framework and material damage used for defining a crime. He quotes Plato expressing crime as a kind of illness of the soul and listing passion, pleasure-seeking, and ignorance as its causes, as well as Aristotle who sees the cause of crime in social conditions, and concludes that “the concept of crime is a concept that can be perceived very differently by different societies in different

periods of history and is even understood in different ways by different societies that lived in the same period.” In religion, he states, “the concept of crime is broadly expressed with the concept of sin. Sin is to act contrary to the rules and values of the religion to which a person belongs.” To this he adds that religion adds to the punishment of crime the dimension of the hereafter which may act as a deterrent. As for punishment within society he states that “when we consider the concept of punishment in terms of its function and purpose ... we can say that the meaning of guilt and the aim of reintegrating the perpetrators into society are given priority”, and expounds this view through a discussion of how the concept of punishment has changed throughout history.

Importantly, he concludes, that “punishments alone are not sufficient for the prevention of delinquency and reintegrating the criminals into the society. Besides the punishments, the individuals should need to be trained”, thus making the argument for religious education.

There follows a discussion of the concept of guilt and of different types of criminal mindsets as well as the social conditions which may promote or facilitate criminal behaviour. Here he singles out unstable family conditions, low income, and low level of education as key factors. “(I) In addition to social and biological factors such as education status, marital status, occupational status, age and gender of individuals, the environment in which the individual grew up, economic conditions, and psychological status are effective. These determinations about the occurrence of crime are important in terms of the role of religious education in the prevention of crime and delinquency in the future.” “In the religion of Islam, the deterioration of human behaviour is mostly attributed to social conditions. This understanding emphasizes the importance of taking measures to prevent delinquency and create a good educational environment. In addition, having the belief that a person is clean can ensure that he has a suitable psychology to turn from it when he commits a mistake.”

As for the effect of re-education, different types of criminals are more or less susceptible to training. “Incidental offenders are considered to be the easiest to correct. It is possible to use the feeling of regret and to say that the element of ‘repentance’ in religion has a great function in the correction of such criminals. Passionate criminals are people who are irritable, and excited, and can become prisoners of rage. It is difficult to say that the training to be provided on the improvement of such criminals can be very permanent because emotion and excitement can often render a good education ineffective.”

The aim of religious education according to the author is one of adjustment, to develop “a healthy spiritual structure and conscience in the person, to look at life and events from a wider perspective, to purify the self.”

So how does religious education in Turkish prisons stand up to this task of “creating an ideal person for society”? “The general purpose of all training is to create good people. However, there are differences in matters such as what are considered good features or which of them is more important. The general aim of religion is to make a ‘man with superior morals’ by enabling the development of social and superior characteristics, mental and emotional abilities given to him by God.”

Within society, the aim is to correct “a person’s behaviour that does not comply with the value system of society due to the lack of development of social and superior characteristics or various biological and social conditions”. “Ensuring the integrity of the society and social peace, healthy adaptation of the individuals to society if there has been a disconnection from society for any reason ... are important aims the religion seeks.”

To re-integrate the criminal into society, a sense of unity with society is sought, also expressed as social cohesion, which is assisted and given meaning by the Islamic concept of “unity” (tawhid). “As can be seen, religion, especially the religion of Islam, is the main element of national unity and solidarity, giving importance to social integration, and also plays an important role in ensuring and protecting the social order.” “In general terms, the goal of religion is to protect fundamental human rights and mental health. According to Islamic scholars, religious rules are ultimately aimed at protecting people’s lives, property, intellect, religion, and progeny.”

The book then proceeds to discuss several methods for delivering religious education in prisons, tailored to prisoners’ situation and background, mentioning amongst other lectures, lessons, question and answer sessions, student-led sessions, and group work and discussion. It was noted that when teaching the Qur’an, only very few teachers made use of a Turkish translation of the meaning and the resource was not readily available to students. Amongst the possible methods, direct lectures by teachers were predominantly found to be used, whereas in the questionnaires prisoners preferred group work and question-and-answer sessions.

A brief history of religious education in Turkey follows. A key observation is that with the introduction of modern sciences, a schism developed where knowledge perceived as modern was taught in secular schools and traditional Islamic teachings in religious schools (madrasahs). The author sees the need to emphasise that the founder of modern Turkey, Mustafa Kemal (Ataturk), himself was in favour of religious education to be taught. This indicates to the reader that the debate over the place of religion in secular Turkish society is still not quite over. In any case, religious education became organised under the auspices of the relevant Ministry which also now regulates the curriculum to be taught to prisoners in correctional facilities.

The author observed that, however, interest in religious education declined and so did the quality. Since the 1980s there has been greater acceptance of the place of religion and religious education even within a secular society and better provision was put in place. The author argues that as in the West, a pluralist model of religious education should be employed.

Focusing on the provision specifically in Turkish prisons then, he states that the key aim of educating prisoners is aligned with the “main purpose of penal enforcement [:] prevention of delinquency and deterrence”. He side steps to argue that since the “death penalty lacks a definite deterrent feature”, “this punishment is unnecessary”. He misses to note that the Islamic concept of revenge puts justice for the victim of a heinous crime on equal footing with the need to prevent re-offending. Rather he focuses on the perpetrator, observing that “reintegration of the person into society, that is, the rehabilitation of the offender, has an important place in addition to the

deterrent factor in punishments”. He quotes a Turkish source (Yucel) observing: “Among the most important issues in the prevention of crimes is the individual’s adoption of the right behaviour and habits within the framework of the records, rather than the fear of punishment.”

When religious education became a compulsory school subject again in the 1980s, prisons were also included as educational settings but the ministry found it difficult to recruit the necessary teachers. Whilst some resources were put in place, including a curriculum with clearly stated objectives, the provision, according to the author, remains inadequate even today. The book then evaluates the responses to the questionnaires in detail, so the author supports both the benefit of religious teaching in prison and the need for improvement in how it is administered.

Amongst the observations from the survey evaluation is a predominance of young people among the prison population: “especially young people between the ages of 15-21 are more inclined to commit crimes”. The “crime rate is also high in regions with high unemployment rates and in regions where large cities are exposed to a continuous wave of immigration”. However, the author cautions that the selection of prisons that were included in the study limits the conclusions that can be drawn since they are concentrated in specific regions.

Most inmates had only completed the compulsory part of their education at primary school and lower secondary school level. Thus “it is clear that the low level of education is an important factor in committing a crime. In addition, the fact that the rate of “Imam Hatip” (religious school) graduates is quite low compared to others indicates that religious belief has a direct positive effect on reducing the crime rate.”

Most prisoners surveyed were from the low and middle-income classes, however, the majority were in employment rather than unemployed, so “unemployment does not play an important role on its own in committing a crime”. As for the type of occupation, manual and casual workers and self-employed persons dominated the prison population.

Amongst the crimes committed, murder and theft presented the highest percentages. The author tries to link it with an illegal attempt to gain status that the poor criminal could not attain through education and legitimate means. Interestingly, the majority of prisoners were on short-term sentences. The discrepancy between the prevalence of serious crimes and short sentences is not explained or explored.

As part of the questions put to prisoners, their religious status before and after incarceration is examined. The majority stated that they believed in God before committing their crime, 96.67% in fact, indicating that outright atheism and agnosticism are still quite rare in Turkey today. However, as the author observes “belief in the existence of Allah alone does not play an effective role in preventing crime and guilt ... because believing in something and gaining knowledge of it and reflecting the behaviour change required by that belief and knowledge ... are two different things. A person knows that something is forbidden but can still do it. The important thing here is not only to give information but also to ensure that this information is transformed into behaviour.”

The majority also believed in the hereafter, hence “believing in the hereafter is not enough for the people itself to regulate their behaviour in this world according to the punishment or reward they believe they will face in the hereafter.” “Most of the prisoners in prisons [also] consider themselves as prisoners of destiny. A high percentage of 87.34% believe in fate. “[T]hat belief in fate turns into fatalism. Fatalism has a negative effect not before the crime is committed but afterward. Because the perpetrator sees this as a predestination of Allah, and this hinders his efforts to be made to reintegrate him into society.”

When it comes to practicing religion, the percentages are still relatively high, yet much lower than the mere profession of belief. 31.34% both said to have prayed regularly and fasted before committing their crime. A still significant 24% fasted but only prayed on Fridays. Only 21.33% did not worship at all and 5.33% did not believe in the necessity of worship. The author postulates that “the rate of committing a crime is lower among those who pray regularly before the crime” but does not demonstrate how he reaches this conclusion. Quoting previous research, however, he establishes alcohol as a key contributing factor to criminality: In that research by Perker 69.04% of criminals drank frequently and 12.03% from time to time. “This shows that the rate of drinking among criminals is high”. Equally, the rate of gambling, although only occasionally, is high.

As for religious education received, the majority were only taught such knowledge within the family setting and a primary school, which was not sufficient to have an impact on behaviour.

Comparing those answers to the ones given for religious situations after imprisonment, “there is no change in belief status after the crime”. The majority (73.71%) also believed that crime was a sin at the time of committing the crime. “What is important in terms of our subject is why the criminal commits a crime when he believes that the crime, he has committed is a sin.” According to the respondents themselves they were “forced to commit this crime and had no other choice”. Only 21.84% believed they had not committed a sin and were not wrong, whilst 8.61% considered their crime as a “good deed”.

“As can be seen, the majority of criminals in prison today accept their crime as a crime (sin). Therefore, it is more appropriate to regard them as accidental criminals (victims of fate) rather than as habitual criminals. It ... would be easier for such criminals to be reintegrated into society.”

Belief in the hereafter did also not change markedly after imprisonment with only a very slight reduction. The number of those believing in fate dropped, with 13.33% having turned angry and offended by fate.

The figures for religious practice before and after imprisonment are difficult to compare. The number of those who pray and fast has dropped significantly to around 20% but the combined rate of those who fast only and those who pray only is well above 60%, thus it seems that practice has increased whilst the type of practice has changed as would be expected with a change of environment. The author does not draw any conclusions from these figures other than that there is “a sign of the

criminals' inclination to religious life". Answering a different question, 78.67% state that they "need to pray" and 19.33% that they do not need to with 2% considering the question as irrelevant. The author observes that "we can think of the high rate of the need to pray as the high desire of the offenders to reconcile with society".

When trying to gauge the "factors that caused their committed crime although they believe that the crime, they committed is a sin", the majority of respondents state despair (51.33%), 19.33% blame the influence of the environment, 16.66% ascribe it to anger and 12.66% claim weakness of faith.

Asked about receiving religious education in prison, over 50% stated that they did not receive any such instruction, yet almost 70% percent expressed a need for such education, with the majority wanting to improve their general religious knowledge, followed by learning to pray and the Qur'an. Most wanted to receive this education in regular lessons but also in one-to-one teaching sessions and from religious teachers plus a provision of religious books. The majority (41.56%) would have liked two or three hours of teaching a week, another third even an hour every day, and the remainder less frequently.

A clear majority of prisoners stated that during their time in prison, their behaviour is changing, increasing their faith and their sense of regret as well as beginning to worship, however, more than a third feel unaffected. For the majority who experience a change this change is explained as being due to a feeling of loneliness, their circle of friends and to despair. To author does not comment on the fact that 20.67% attribute this change to their circle of friends. In my own experience, positive peer pressure in prison is often more effective in bringing about a change than teaching sessions, given that these are limited to maybe once a week whereas prisoners keep company with each other all the time.

Whilst the figures for whether religious education received in prison has brought about a change or not are distributed fairly equally, a very high number of prisoners expect that they intend to continue with religious attendance and learning after release (64.67%).

Drawing overall conclusions from the research in his summary the author notes that it cannot be said that religious education is given within the scope of a serious program under prison conditions today and that those who perform this duty have undergone special training. Due to the "inadequacy of the educational infrastructure in prisons and the failure to take measures to provide the training required by this duty ... the important effect of religious education in providing social cohesion, personal mental health, and improvement is not properly utilised... If religious education in prisons is provided by officials with special training, prisons will lead to positive changes."

In his conclusion, the author reiterates the aim of his study "to reintegrate criminals into society in the context of revealing the relationship between individual, crime, and society on the axis of religious education" and "to determine the role of religious education". He acknowledges the key shortcoming that the data on which his study relies date from the late 1990s and that many changes have been made since.

Essentially, this revisiting of old data makes the study a position paper providing the backdrop of the author's recommendations:

"With its current situation, it can be said that the religious education given in prisons does not have a significant effect on criminals. However, this should not lead to the conclusion that the expected effect of religious education in terms of social cohesion and improvement is a mistake." He then argues for a professional, scientifically informed, approach to providing religious education in prisons, which focuses first and foremost on appropriate training for those tasked to deliver it.

The book does not offer any new data and to take a "fresh look" at data from almost three decades ago is not likely going to provide the answers needed today. It is commendable that the author is trying to revive interest in the subject of religious education in prisons and undoubtedly many of the observations from back then still hold today. Yet, a meaningful assessment of the actual current situation would need to be based on current data, especially since both the beliefs held by young people and the economic situation of society at large have changed dramatically from that of the previous generations. The author must be lauded for reviving interest in the subject but does not bring anything new to the table. Most of his arguments, although often pre-conceived, are and remain valid, but the science-led approach to the topic he advocates must begin with surveying the actual situation and requirements before formulating a suitable response. Where I fully agree with the author is that the issue ought to be given much more prominence than it has done since he first undertook his thesis in 1997.